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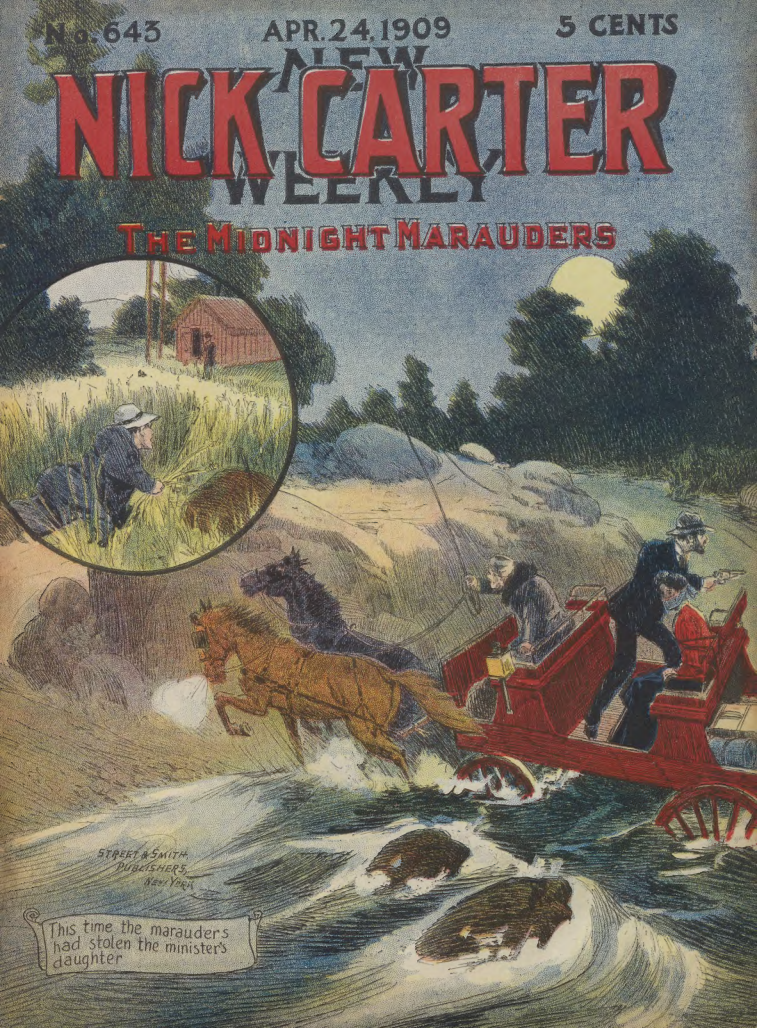
NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

THE MIDNIGHT MARAUDERS



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This time the marauders had stolen the minister's daughter

NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

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The Midnight Marauders

OR,

Nick Carter's Telephone Mystery.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

MIDNIGHT MARAUDERS.

"We have sent for you, Mr. Carter, to ask you to explain one of the strangest mysteries that has ever happened in this section of the country."

The speaker was a tall, spare, austere, country gentleman, Western in type and having the outward appearance of a preacher, as indeed he was.

He was seated at the center of a semi-circular group of men numbering twenty-seven, and from the first one to the last these men presented the appearance of rugged toil, steadfastness of purpose, and more or less of the rural simplicity we expect to encounter when meeting with a community of farmers.

The place of meeting was the town hall in the small village of Westerly, in the State of Michigan. The occasion of it was a letter which Nick Carter had received at his home in New York, one week before that time, and which should be repeated here in order to give the reader an exact idea of the amount of knowledge Nick Carter possessed, regarding the expected case, at the time he was taken into the presence of his prospective clients, at three o'clock that afternoon; the time when the remark, which opens this chapter, was made to him.

The letter:

"MR. NICHOLAS CARTER, New York City.

"DEAR SIR: As the appointed representative of this community, I write to you to ask if you can make it possible to come here and spend a few days of your valuable time among us? We hope not to be overcharged for the service, because none of us are rich men, but we are quite willing to defray all necessary expenses, and to pay you whatever sum in addition thereto, which you may deem just and equable.

"The community I represent surrounds the small village of Westerly, in this State, and the neighborhood is people by a thrifty, well-to-do, industrious class of husbandmen and farmers.

"During the past six months, these people to whom I refer, have been excessively annoyed, deeply mystified, and greatly outraged by a succession of depredations, malicious cruelties, robberies, petty thefts, etc., which have been committed among them, and because every effort to discover the perpetrators of these outrages has been fruitless, it has been decided, by an unanimous vote, that this letter be sent to you.

"In order to interest you, I will state in one paragraph and as concisely as possible, one point prominently identified with the mysteries.

"We have, in this community, a local telephone com-

pany which boasts of twenty-seven subscribers, I being among them. The outrages, etc., before referred to, have invariably been committed against one of the twenty-seven telephone subscribers I have mentioned. There has been no deviation from this apparent rule. To give you an example of what has been done, we will say that I am called from my bed in the middle of the night to answer the telephone. I place the receiver at my ear, and am told 'your barn is on fire,' or 'your red cow is dead in the stable,' or 'your bay horse has had his throat cut.' I rush to the spot referred to, whichever one it may be, to find, to my utter dismay, that the telephonic message was correct.

"I will not be more explicit in this letter. It will not be necessary, if you decide to come here, for in that case all can be explained by word of mouth; if you do not come, it would be a waste of time to explain anything.

"But we trust, sir, that you will have interest enough in the pursuit of your profession, to devote a little of your time to us. We have been greatly mystified, and greatly troubled, by these occurrences, for six months. We have made every effort consistent with our means and opportunities, to solve the problems thus presented. We have entirely failed. An early reply will be appreciated by all the persons for whom I speak, as well as by

"Yours very truly,
"REUBEN CROSS,
Rector of the Church of Grace."

When Nick Carter received the letter, it suggested only one of those purely local mysteries which sometimes affect a rural community, and which are almost invariably caused by petty jealousies, or a desire for vengeance for some fancied wrong.

The detective did not think that he would be long engaged upon the solution of a mystery of this kind, and as it happened that he could spare the time, he responded to the Reverend Reuben Cross by telegraph, saying that he would start at once.

This chapter opens half an hour after his arrival at Westerly, where he was met at the station by Mr. Cross, in person, and conducted by him to the town hall of the village, where every man of those subscribers to the local telephone association was present, awaiting him.

The meeting had been arranged in a somewhat theatrical form, Nick thought.

The raised platform at the end of the hall, where speakers usually stood to address audiences gathered there, contained one armchair, in which Nick Carter was asked to be seated; and the twenty-seven men occupied two of the foremost rows of chairs, facing it.

Thus he was placed in a position to scan the faces of his clients, for so he must regard every one of these men present, and to note the personal characteristic of each one as he questioned them.

He had just taken his seat when the Rev. Reuben Cross, who occupied a chair at the middle of the group, addressed him by the opening remark, as quoted here.

"Your letter interested me," replied the detective, running his eyes from one end of the row to the other, and finally fixing them upon the minister. "I will ask you now to begin at the extreme left, and let each man rise in his place as his turn comes, give me his name, and the location of the house where he lives, and explain to me, in as few words as possible, his personal experience with this mystery."

The detective produced a note-book and pencil, in order to jot down names and directions he should receive; and a tall, bearded farmer got upon his feet, and said:

"My name is John King. I own one hundred and sixty acres of land, one corner of which extends into this village. My house is located at the end of this street, and is the last one on the left as you walk south from here. I have stables, barns, and other outbuildings necessary to carry on such a place as mine. About a month ago, or, to be exact, five weeks ago come to-morrow night, my telephone bell rang at half-past ten o'clock. I guessed, when the summons came, what it meant, for already these ominous warnings and announcements had become an old story among us. I placed the receiver at my ear, and was told: 'Your bay mare was stolen from her stall half an hour ago, and has been taken northward.'

"Well, sir, I lost no time in going out to my stable. The bay mare was gone. I threw a saddle on a sorrel, and hiked to the northward as fast as I could gallop. But I didn't overtake the bay mare, and I didn't find her for three weeks. Then she had been sold to a man who owns a livery, a hundred miles away from here, and I had some difficulty in securing possession of her again. That is all you need to know at the present moment, I think."

John King took his seat, and the next man stood up.

"My name is Bayard Green," he said. "A week ago last night I was called up in the same manner as Mr. King, with the difference that it was nearly one o'clock in the morning. 'Your corn crib has been set afire,' was the information I received. I didn't wait to dress, but ran from the house in the direction of the corn crib, to find that it was already ablaze, and I tell you, sir, that I had great difficulty in saving my other buildings. The corn crib was entirely destroyed, and almost its entire contents was ruined. I live at the

other end of the same street; this one. Anybody can tell you which house it is."

Mr. Green took his seat, and another man arose, giving his name, and describing his residence.

"We're rather sound sleepers at my house," he said. "Besides, I was one of the first persons, if not actually the first one, to be victimized in this manner. My telephone message came after I had risen in the morning, and had made ready to begin my chores. I was just starting from the house, and had opened the door, when my telephone rang.

"'Who is it?' I asked.

"'None of your business,' was the reply.

"'Oh, ain't it? All right,' says I, and I was about to hang up the receiver, when the chap at the other end of the wire says:

"'Wait a minute.'

"'What's the matter with you?' says I. 'Ain't you got no name?'

"'Just you hold your horses,' says he. 'How about that money that you had poked away in a stocking, and hid in the bottom drawer of your bureau, in the spare room?"

"Well, sir, that sort o' feazed me. What that duffer said, over the wire, about the money and the stocking and the place where they were hidden, was absolutely true, and I didn't wait for no further information; but I jammed that receiver onto its hook, and ran for the bureau drawer. The stocking was there, all right, but it was empty; and when I begun to look around me, I found that my house had been pretty generally ransacked, from top to bottom, and from cellar to garret. They had just about cleaned me out of everything that I had of value, and not one of us inside the house had heard a sound."

"You say you were one of the first ones who had an experience of this sort?" asked the detective.

"I was the first one, Mr. Carter; that is of the general mix-up. Of course there has always been more or less wrongdoing in this community, just as there would be in any other one, but so far as the telephone part of it is concerned, I was number one."

"What is your case?" asked Nick, addressing the next man.

"Mine is another exhibition of wanton cruelty. I had an Alderny cow that I was very fond of. True, she was getting old, but she was just as good as she ever was, and she always gave us between seven and eight quarts at a milking. I got a message one night, about midnight, saying that I would find her in her stall, with her throat cut; and I did. My name is John Turner, and I live on the old Bedford place."

"Have any of you four men who have already described your experiences any recollection of ever having heard the voice before that addressed you over the telephone, as you have described?"

The four shook their heads in unison.

Reuben Cross stood up in his place again.

"Mr. Carter," he stated, "I should say that we have been very carefully through all of that part of this investigation. We have even gone farther than that in the matter, all of which I will describe and explain to you in due time."

"Very good," replied Nick. "What has number five got to say?"

Number five, as Nick designated the fifth one in the row that faced him, had had one-third of his flock of sheep cruelly butchered in one night, about two months before. Number six had lost a valuable pair of steers, which had been driven from their pasture at night, and which were never found.

Number seven, who owned many valuable horses, and who raised the colts of trotters for the market, disposing of them as soon as they had been broken to harness and had been partly trained, had lost almost his entire outfit of harnesses, blankets, robes, etc., one night in the same manner, being notified by telephone as the others had been, within a short time; that is to say, within a few hours after the theft was committed.

Eight had lost a valuable stallion, ultimately recovered; nine had been told over the phone that a Percheron horse had broken its leg in the stall, and he had found, upon examination, that the poor beast had evidently been struck by a club and purposely maimed.

But it is not necessary that we should give the personal experiences of each of these men.

One and all, every one of the twenty-seven had suffered at the hands of the midnight marauders, and many of them had been visited two and three times some of them four times, and one had been the object of attack on five different occasions.

Each one had about the same story to tell, and although there was a difference in time, place, and the character of the losses, there was no difference whatever in the manner of any of them, and, without exception, the telephonic communication had been made a part of the mystery.

CHAPTER II.

A TELEPHONE MYSTERY.

It was half-past five o'clock before this preliminary meeting was over, before the twenty-seven victims of the mysterious marauders could tell their separate stories.

Nick Carter listened to each and every one of them carefully, questioning a few, but as a rule contenting himself by listening to the straightforward statements that were made.

He took notes concerning many of these, and he jotted down the names of each one of his informants.

But it was no part of his plan to confuse them by an amount of questioning at that particular time. He preferred to wait until he had had an opportunity to digest what he had been told.

For half an hour before the meeting closed, the men had begun to show signs of uneasiness, chore time having arrived; and "chore time" is the most important period of the day in the life of a farmer.

Nick Carter realized this, but nevertheless he wanted the story of every man there before the meeting should adjourn.

At the close of it, he accompanied the minister to his home, where he was invited to take supper; and the Reverend Reuben Cross had not been exempt from the attention of the marauders.

When he had begun his story, at the meeting, Nick had listened to it only so far as to get an outline of the statement, and had then interrupted him by saying:

"I will discuss your experience with you later, Mr. Cross, at the supper table, since you have invited me to your house for the night."

At the close of the meeting the detective stood up in his place on the platform, and addressed them all. He said:

"My friends, I would rather not express a definite opinion concerning your experiences until I have had an opportunity to investigate. I shall not ask you to meet me again in this manner. If I have occasion to consult with any one of you, I will call in person. I wish you to go about your several occupations precisely as if this meeting had not occurred, and as if you were not aware of my presence among you, or were, at least, indifferent to it. Could I have known beforehand—that is, before I came here—the particulars of this affair, I should have preferred to come quietly, and to have seen you separately, without the knowledge of my arrival among you being noised abroad. As it is, every man, woman and child in the community knows that I am here, and why I am here. However, we will make the best of it; and now I perceive that you are anxious to get to your chores, so I will dismiss the meeting."

He had to shake hands twenty-seven times after that, for even the minister would not exempt himself from this proceeding; but Nick was rather glad of this opportunity to observe very closely the men with whom he had to deal.

It is always more or less satisfactory to take a man by the hand, for a considerable knowledge of his personality, and of his individual instincts, may be obtained through contact by that means.

He walked to the parsonage, along the shaded street, beside Reuben Cross; but he talked of the beauties of the little village, of the delightful evening air, and of anything but the matter that had brought him there; this he postponed for the present.

At the parsonage he made the acquaintance of Mrs. Cross and her daughter Sally, the latter being a young lady of twenty-one, who reminded Nick strongly of her father, in her serious view of things.

The two women of the family were greatly concerned about the meeting that had taken place, and deeply curious to know all that had happened there; and Nick listened with some amusement while the minister described to them in detail all that had occurred.

After supper the detective, with Mr. Cross, adjourned to the latter's study, where Nick was told that he might smoke, if he cared to do so, and was given a comfortable chair from which he could gaze through the window upon the rapidly darkening landscape. It was yet early in the season, and night did not come very swiftly.

As Nick, having lighted his cigar, seated himself upon the designated chair, his attention was attracted to the telephone, which was of the desk-variety, and which rested upon a small table within reach of his left hand.

"Mr. Cross," he said, after he had smoked in silence for a few moments, "I have found that the meeting we attended this afternoon was particularly and peculiarly interesting."

"I thought you would," said the minister.

"The character of the assaults upon the members of your community has been so varied that I am more puzzled about them than I expected to be. My first thought, upon receiving your letter, was that the whole matter was the result of some scheme of vengeance."

"That was our first conclusion, too," replied the minister. "That is, I will not say that it was our first thought, but the idea had occurred to many of us that such might be the explanation."

"And now?" asked Nick.

"Now, Mr. Carter, we confess ourselves to be entirely at fault. We can think of no logical explanation. The theory of vengeance is not tenable for many reasons."

"What is your personal opinion, Mr. Cross, having lived in the midst of all this business?"

The minister smiled whimsically, and replied:

"I have many opinions regarding it, and I have none. I mean to say that I have formed different opinions, from time to time, but have been compelled to change each one of them for another, later on. Nothing seems fully to explain this mystery."

"What efforts have been made in the matter?"

"We have made many efforts."

"Tell me just what you have done."

"In the beginning we sent to Detroit for a detective. He came and stayed a week among us, and went away no wiser than when he arrived here. Then we sent to Chicago."

"Were those men detectives from private agencies?" asked Nick.

"Naturally; but we were referred to them, in each case, by the regular police of the cities I have named."

"Did the Chicago man accomplish anything?"

"No more than the one who came from Detroit."

"What else was done?"

"I sent a personal letter to a man named Bullwhinkle, in Kansas City, who operates a detective agency at that place, and with whom I have long been personally acquainted. I appealed to him, on account of our long personal friendship, to come here in person and at least discuss the matter with me."

"And he came?"

"Yes."

"Tell me more about Mr. Bullwhinkle, and what he accomplished or failed to do."

"When I wrote to Bullwinkle I did not take any of my friends here into my confidence."

"That was wise."

"I did it on my own account, and on my personal responsibility. He came to see me as a guest, and remained at my house while he was here. It was not until after he had gone that the rest of the gentlemen whom you met to-day knew what his business was."

"That was wise also."

"Instead of asking each one to tell his own story, as was done to-day. I told their stories to Bullwhinkle. I am personally familiar with every case, and could tell their experiences quite as well as they could."

"Yes?" said Nick.

"Bullwhinkle is something of an electrician. He had an idea that if he could establish a secret telephone that was connected with these others, he might by that means obtain some clue if he passed his days in sleeping and his nights with the receiver at his ear."

"A good idea."

"Nothing came of it."

"Did nothing happen while he was here?"

"Not a thing."

"How long did he remain?"

"He was here ten days and nights."

"How many of those nights did he spend with the receiver at his ear?"

"Every one of them. He arrived in the morning, and he began the installation of his secret telephone as soon as it was dark that night. By midnight he was ready to listen, and he did so with a receiver strapped against his ear."

"Nothing happened?"

"Not a thing."

"When had the last occurrence taken place before Mr. Bullwhinkle arrived?"

"The second night preceding his coming."

"When did the next one occur?"

"The very first night after he had gone away."

"And you say that no one suspected his business here?"

"Not that I am aware of."

"What pose did he take while he was here?"

"He posed as a brother minister."

"What other efforts, if any, did he make in this matter?"

"I can't tell you as to that, Mr. Carter. I know that he slept four or five hours each day, and that he devoted the remainder of his time to investigation, following whatever course he believed to be best. Each night he repaired to his secret telephone. Each evening, before he went to it, he reported to me that he had discovered absolutely nothing, and on the day he took his departure, the last thing he said to me about it was this: 'I might find out the mystery of this affair, Cross, if I were to remain here long enough, but thus far I have discovered nothing. I cannot absent myself from my business any longer, and I am afraid you will have to work the thing out yourself.'"

"Where did he locate the secret telephone he used?" asked Nick.

"In an old red schoolhouse located about a mile from where we are seated now."

"A building that is not used?"

"Yes."

"How did he carry the wire into the building?"

"By a loop from one of the poles which stands near the schoolhouse."

"A loop which no one could see who was passing that way?" said Nick, smiling.

"No, I think not."

"Why not?"

"He was very careful to conceal it."

"How was he careful?"

"He led the loop down the post to the ground and then around the top of the ground among bushes and grass to the building. It was insulated wire, and he was very careful about its arrangement. In the daytime he removed his instrument entirely from the building, and left no traces there of his presence that might be discovered by a casual observer."

"Yet you say that the very night following his visit here there was another alarm over the telephone?"

"Yes."

"You have twenty-seven subscribers on this line, Mr. Cross?"

"We have."

"The twenty-seven different houses are not called over the same wire, are they?"

"No; we have an exchange."

"Then, as I understand it, when these outrages are committed, the person who sends the announcement of them over the telephone must first call up the exchange and ask for the desired number?"

"That part of it creates another remarkable circumstance in this affair, Mr. Carter."

"How so?"

"Because in no single instance has such a call passed through the exchange."

"But I don't understand," said Nick. "If John King should wish to call you up at this moment, or if I, seated here, should reach out for the telephone and wish to call John King, I would have to know his number and ask for it at the exchange, would I not?"

"As it happens, you would not," said Mr. Cross with a smile.

"If not, why not?"

"We are divided into a system of party wires. On each party wire there are from two to six houses. We never permit more than six families to be on the same wire. There are now five party wires entering the exchange, and it happens that three of them have five families and two of them have six, which makes the twenty-seven members. I happen to be on the same party wire with Mr. King, and to call him to the telephone it would be necessary only for me to ring three times, since that is his call."

"I see," said the detective.

He referred to his notes and studied them for a moment.

"I notice by the memoranda I have made here that the last outrage, as we must characterize all these occurrences, happened only three nights ago; that is, the day following the one on which you wrote that letter to me."

"Yes."

"I notice also that a week has rarely been permitted to elapse without some one of those occurrences happening."

"That is also true."

"I think it is likely, since what you told me about Bullwhinkle, and because the entire community must know of my presence and my business here, that the marauder, or marauders, will be apt to do as they did in his case—that is, they will be inclined to discontinue their activities while I am present among them."

"That is probable."

"If that should be so, Mr. Cross, I will remain about a week, and then take my departure."

"You mean that you will devote no more than a week to it?"

"No, sir; I mean that I will solve the problem. But if I disappear, you need not personally be afraid that I have gone entirely."

CHAPTER III.

NICK CARTER'S MIDNIGHT WORK.

The detective spent that night at the house of the minister.

He slept like a child, dreamlessly and soundly, and the night was not disturbed by fire, or robberies, or malicious acts of any kind.

The detective spent the following day in driving from place to place about the community, and he managed to call upon many of the telephone subscribers.

They were all glad to see him, and each one talked with the same frankness and earnestness employed at the meeting the preceding evening. Nick could not detect among any of them a desire to conceal any-

thing, and there was not one in whose face or manner he saw a suggestion of double dealing.

The second night passed without incident, and during it, Nick slept at the house of John King.

The following day was employed much as the first one had been, and that night was passed by the detective in a different house. The third, fourth and fifth days were no different in any respect from those that had preceded it, and each night the detective slept in a different place, wondering if it was to be fruitful of any more of the outrages that had driven the community so nearly to the point of desperation.

During his drive about the streets of the village and the roads which led out from it, he paused once to spend an hour at the old schoolhouse where Bullwinkle had installed a secret telephone; and he wondered what the Kansas City detective could have expected to find out from an instrument located as that one was on one of the lesser party wires of the system.

While he wondered, an idea occurred to him which he resolved then and there to carry out, if it could be done.

That afternoon he took a train for Chicago, telling Cross that he would return within a few days; but from Chicago he wired to Chick, and he waited at the Great Northern Hotel until his first assistant arrived.

But in the meantime he had found an expert electrician with whom he passed many hours in close conference, posting himself thoroughly regarding certain points of the telephone business with which he was not entirely familiar.

The consequence was that when Chick arrived on the eighteen-hour train, Nick was prepared to carry out the plan he had decided to adopt.

We, who are familiar with the history of Nick Carter's experience, and who know Chick quite as well as we do the detective himself, remember perfectly well that on many occasions they had made themselves up to represent one another so perfectly as to be able entirely to deceive any person who came in contact with them.

This had been originally made a careful study by Nick Carter and his first assistant, Chick.

It had often become necessary for the latter to represent himself in the character of his chief, so that Nick Carter might appear to be in two places at once.

When Chick arrived in Chicago he went with Nick to the latter's rooms at the Great Northern Hotel, and they spent two hours alone there together.

When they came out of that room and descended to the office desk, it was Chick who stepped forward to pay the bill, although the man to whom he paid it supposed he was talking with the same person who had engaged the room.

Chick had transformed himself during the sojourn upstairs into a perfect representation of Nick Carter; so perfect, indeed, that no person not perfectly familiar with them would have been deceived, and many persons who knew them well could likewise have been hoodwinked.

It was Chick who took the train that evening for the little town of Westerly in Michigan; it was Chick who walked from the station to the house of Reuben Cross, with Nick Carter's satchel in his hand, and it was Chick who was greeted by Mr. Cross with an exclamation of pleasure, as he said:

"Why how do you do, Mr. Carter! I am very glad indeed that you have returned to us."

"Thank you," said Chick; "and I am glad to return."

We see by this that the first assistant was playing the part of his chief in the telephone mystery case.

He had left Nick Carter in Chicago, and his instructions were to carry on the proceedings formerly followed by Nick Carter in person; that is, to continue to drive about the place from house to house, and to appear to keep up the investigation diligently.

Nick had posted him thoroughly, regarding the personal appearance of the more important of the twenty-seven clients in the case. Nick had drawn sketches of many of them, so that Chick could not fail in recognition. The detective had described their characteristics and had given Chick the memoranda made at the first meeting already described.

Thus we see that Nick Carter had placed himself in a position by which he could work entirely in the dark, following out any plan which might occur to him untrammeled by espionage on the part of others, and without being bothered by questions.

He could work among them without his personal presence being even suspected; and ultimately, if it were necessary, he could appear to depart in disgust from Westerly, as if the business of investigation had been abandoned.

But in the meantime, if that were done, Nick Carter could remain in person on the scene, quietly working on toward the undoing of the marauders.

We need not pay much attention at the present moment to the occupations of Nick Carter's first assistant while he remained in the village of Westerly.

He was supposed by all who saw him or came in

contact with him to be the detective Nick Carter in proper person; to be the same man who had arrived in the village at three o'clock one afternoon, and who had met the twenty-seven subscribers in the town hall at that time.

Nobody doubted this, for the detectives had arranged the matter with such care, and had carried it out with such exactitude, that not even a suspicion of the transfer of character was created.

When Chick left Chicago, enroute for Westerly, Nick Carter remained in the Western metropolis.

If he told his first assistant what his own plans were, it is not necessary that we should repeat them here, for we shall find out soon enough.

Nick Carter followed Chick to Westerly upon a train which would have deposited him there about ten o'clock that same evening, had he chosen to remain upon it. But he did not do that. Instead, he left the train two stations beyond Westerly, at a siding where he had learned it would stop for a time, in order to allow an express to pass that was bound in the opposite direction.

There the detective dropped from the rear platform of the train upon which he was a passenger, and concealed himself in the bushes beside the road until it went on and left him there alone.

The time was near the hour of midnight and no one was abroad in that locality.

Nick was seven miles beyond the station at Westerly, but the night was keen and cool, and although there was no moon, there were millions of stars in sight, and a seven-mile walk did not at all dismay the detective.

We know that he had passed almost a week in making himself thoroughly familiar with the locality in and about Westerly.

There was not a road, a lane, hardly a cow-path in the neighborhood along which he had not traveled; there was not a house with its outbuildings which he had not seen and studied; there were few of them that he had not entered—none at all among the twenty-seven subscribers. He had walked across farms, he had followed paths across fields and pastures, through woods, and, in fact, had delved into every so-called nook and cranny of the neighborhood.

It was about two o'clock in the morning when he approached the village he was seeking, but he did not go directly to it.

Instead, he left the main highway, scaled a fence, and presently lost himself in the darkness of some woods which he crossed, presently arriving at the old schoolhouse which has been mentioned before.

He had carried with him a considerable amount of weight in a telescope satchel; a weight which would have appalled another person, particularly in face of the prospect of a seven-mile walk. But the articles contained in the telescope case were necessary to Nick's plans, and he had not thought about the weight of them.

Now, when he arrived at the old schoolhouse, he found the ends of the wires where Bullwhinkle had left them after leading the loop down the pole and along the ground toward the red building. Nick cut these wires at some distance from the building, but also at a considerable distance from the pole, and he spliced on two other wires, which he proceeded to lead away through the woods to a point which he had selected, and which will hereafter be more definitely described.

The wire he used was thoroughly insulated, and Nick took care to conceal it in such a manner that it would not readily be discovered, and certainly could not be stumbled upon by any ordinary accident.

The reader must understand that when Bullwhinkle departed from Westerly, he, of course, disconnected his loop at the top of the pole; but he did leave the wires which led down the pole to the ground and into the schoolhouse. Nick had discovered this much, and it was not necessary to disturb anything on that pole at the time.

If the marauders were aware of the existence of that loop, and knew of its being disconnected, it was all the better for Nick's plans, because they would not be looking for another one of the kind, and they would not see that this one was any different than it had been ever since Bullwhinkle's departure.

From the point in the woods where the detective left the ends of the two wires he had spliced upon those left by Bullwhinkle, the detective started away in another direction.

A quarter of a mile distant, and at the southern extremity of the same woods, he climbed a telegraph-pole, using the creepers employed for that purpose, and having cut the wires that were insulated at the top of it, he made every adjustment to necessitate another loop like that one already described.

But he did not connect it; he only left it so that it could be connected with very little trouble at any time he saw fit to do so.

Down the pole he led other wires, taking great pains

to conceal them from view from the roadway, and these he trailed away into the depths of the woods as he had done on the former occasion.

By the time he had completed this second task, daylight was approaching, and he sought the place selected for his sojourn while there, which was a small hut formerly occupied by a half crazed individual who had been dead several years.

The hut had, during the wild man's time, gained an unsavory reputation among the youth of that neighborhood, and they gave it a wide berth, all of which Nick had taken into consideration in selecting it for his headquarters.

It was located on the bank of a rivulet which could, by no stretch of the imagination, be called a brook, although it was of sufficient magnitude to supply the detective with clear and sparkling drinking water.

He spent the remaining hour before sunrise in thoroughly cleaning the hut and rendering it habitable; a considerable undertaking, as he discovered.

That done, he dived again into the thicker brush which surrounded the vicinity of the hut, and brought forth blankets and other articles from places where he had previously concealed them, so that presently he found himself very comfortably accommodated, and he stretched out upon the floor of the little place to obtain some much needed rest and sleep.

The telescope case he had brought with him contained among other things sufficient food for that particular day; he would provide for other emergencies of the kind as they arose.

The night following, as soon as the hour was late enough, and it is well known that people retire early in such localities, the detective set out to complete his arrangements.

We need not describe them more graphically than we have already done, save to add that, before the dawn of another day, Nick Carter had brought three more loops into that hut from different directions, and had now succeeded in tapping every one of the party wires which led to the exchange mentioned by Mr. Cross.

He spent so much of the succeeding day when he was not sleeping in adjusting a switchboard inside the hut, and by nightfall had a perfectly, if crudely, arranged exchange to be devoted to his own secret purposes.

He considered himself now ready to carry on the investigation in his own way, and he did not believe that the marauders had any suspicion, or would be likely to obtain any, of his presence there.

If a telephone call should come from any quarter to the exchange, asking for a certain number, Nick would know of it, and could adjust his own affairs inside that hut so that he would be able to overhear everything that was said between the two telephonic terminals.

He accomplished this by a series of cutouts and cutins that the electrician in Chicago had planned for him, and there would be no possibility that the people at the central exchange would suspect his presence on any of the wires.

He thus had every one of the party wires leading through his hut.

It has been said that during the interviews that Nick had with the twenty-seven members of the telephone society that he had not detected in any one of them anything to make him suspicious of that person. The idea had come to him, therefore, that the party or parties who committed the outrages complained of, gave their information over the telephone-wires to the victim who had been attacked, not over a regular telephone, not from a regular station of one of the houses of the twenty-seven subscribers, but by means of the very system that had been employed by Bullwhinkle.

During his rides about the community he had followed every wire of that telephone association. He had inspected the wires as carefully as he could do it without attracting too much attention to his occupation, and he believed that he had found several places where the wires had been cut and looped, although he was not certain as to this.

He was ready now to proceed understandingly with the case in hand.

CHAPTER IV.

ONE NIGHT'S MYSTERY.

It was now the morning of the ninth day since Nick Carter first arrived at Westerly.

Eight nights had come and gone since his arrival there, and a few nights immediately preceding it, during which the malicious ones had not practised any of their misdeeds.

This the detective felt was due to his known presence in the community.

The reader may suppose that Nick erred in keeping Chick at the house of the minister, thus warning the wrong-doers to remain quiet, but the detective had a distinct purpose in this.

He preferred that nothing should be done in the way

of thefts, fires, or cruelties until he was thoroughly prepared through his own arrangements to hear the telephonic warnings when they should be sent to the victims. It would be time later on to let Chick go away, and to make it appear that Nick Carter had abandoned all further effort at detection.

In the meantime, he had other uses for Chick, and they had arranged a system of communication by which one could readily send messages to the other, if it were necessary.

It must not be supposed, either, that it was any part of the detective's plans to send Chick entirely away from that locality.

The detective, who had been working night and day in his preparations, took a considerable period of rest following upon the completion of his plans, and then, through the assistance of Chick, who had been told to leave certain articles at certain places, having stocked himself with provisions and other necessities for his stay in the woods, he began his period of waiting, which he felt sure was to result in the apprehension of the marauders.

Chick, in the meantime, had been engaged in making the personal acquaintance of several of the twenty-seven subscribers whom Nick had designated to him.

Among these was the man, John Turner, whose Alderny cow had had its throat cut; also John King, whose bay mare was stolen and driven away; likewise Bayard Green, whose corn-crib had been burned so mysteriously.

The detective had no definite purpose in directing Chick to get more deeply into acquaintance with these persons, save that he wanted his assistant to study their characters a little more closely, and also those of any others toward whom he might be attracted.

At no time during Nick's period of driving around the neighborhood, nor while Chick was likewise engaged, could any clue be hit upon which would lead to the carrying out of a theory of vengeance; and Nick's own idea about the matter was that the outrages were committed by some person who was a crank, in the sense that he was crazed to the extent of homicidal mania, and found a relief for it in this way which obviated the necessity for murdering human beings.

The bloodlust need not always be human blood.

A man affected with homicidal mania merely wants to kill; it becomes a passion with him; and frequently, if he has reason enough left to partially control those insane instincts, he can satisfy the unwholesome craving by a recourse to other crimes of lesser magnitude.

Nick's whole idea of the case had gradually settled upon this theory.

He believed that somewhere among the twenty-seven families interested in the telephone he might find such a person as we have described.

If not there among the twenty-seven, then among the twenty odd families that remained to make up that community he would find one.

If the person were connected with one of the families who already possessed a telephone, it might be that sometimes the instrument was used from the house when it was possible for him to do so without being overheard by any members of the family; but, in any case, he had no doubt that the loop method was made more frequent use of.

Yet there was a denying element to this theory, and it consisted in the fact that the places Nick had discovered where the wire had been cut, and probably looped, were in widely different localities; whereas, if they had been made by one person residing in a house where a telephone was already installed, they should have been located nearer to it, if the loops were really used at all.

While Chick remained a guest of the Cross family, nothing happened, and it was two weeks after the date of the detective's arrival at Westerly when he determined that the time for Chick's departure had come.

Nick had had opportunity to test thoroughly his telephone arrangement.

By sitting before his exchange board in the hut in the woods, he could catch every call that was made between any two of the twenty-seven houses.

So one morning he left a message for Chick in the agreed-upon place, telling him that the time had arrived for him to depart, and to carry out the rest of the plan as arranged between them.

Chick left Westerly that afternoon.

He was accompanied to the train by Reuben Cross and big John King, and it was with many expressions of regret that the two men bade adieu to Nick Carter, whom they believed Chick to be.

Cross smiled meaningly at Chick when they shook hands for the last time, for he remembered what Nick had once said to him about his possibly going away from the village. Cross believed that the detective would return, and in this, we know, he was not mistaken.

In leaving the place, Chick adopted something of the same methods that Nick Carter had employed in returning to it. He went only so far as was necessary,

left the train, changed his disguise, made himself over into the appearance of a wandering tramp, and so journeyed by easy stages toward Westerly again, and finally, in the middle of the night, arrived at the door of the hut where Nick Carter was seated with the telephone receiver strapped against his ear.

Even then the marauders, although they must be by necessity impatient to again begin their activities, gave no sign of their existence during the remainder of that night, and it was not until the one following it, when they believed Nick Carter to have entirely departed from their midst, that the alarm came.

It was half-past ten that night, and the two detectives were seated together in the hut, each with a receiver at his ear.

It must be remembered that every message sent over the telephone wires passed through that hut, and that the two detectives were perforce compelled to listen to a lot of very uninteresting talk.

Farmer's wives and daughters, sons and servants find much to gossip about over telephone wires which are as handy as these were, and it was extremely tiresome work for the detectives to listen to all this sort of twaddle, most of it meaningless, much of it nonsense, and none of it interesting.

But now something happened that was startling.

"Is that Five B?" a masculine voice demanded to know.

"Yes," came the reply. "Who are you?"

"Your gray mare has been poisoned and is dead in her stall," came the astounding reply.

Nick, who heard it as distinctly as the man to whom it was addressed, dashed the receiver from his ear, leaped to his feet, and ran as fast as he could go from the hut in the direction from which he knew that telephone message must have proceeded.

That is to say, the call and the answer was over the party wire known as B, and as the central exchange had not been communicated with in obtaining it, the message must have been sent from somewhere along that particular party line.

Nick knew every inch of the way. He knew how to get to the wire quickly, but he had small hopes that he could accomplish anything by the search that night, unless he could find where a loop had been made.

If the call had come from a house—from the house of one of the regular subscribers—it would be impossible to locate it.

B happened to be the wire to which the detective had made the first attachment, and it was the one located nearest to his hut.

He dashed out upon the highway directly in front of the red schoolhouse, and he leaped into the road just in time to hear the rattle of buggy-wheels as the vehicle was driven away at furious speed toward the north. He stopped where he was, and listened; then he ran on again, following the wire, not in the direction taken by the rapidly moving vehicle, but in the opposite way, realizing at once that, if that buggy contained the men who had committed the deed of poisoning the gray mare in its stall, the evidence of their presence would be found, not in the direction they were going, but in that from which they had come.

Twenty rods farther on toward the village he found a leather mitten lying in the middle of the road, and as it was not the season of the year when mittens were worn, he stopped, believing that it had been lost from the vehicle that had been driven so furiously past that spot.

It was just an ordinary leather mitten, and there were scores like it in that neighborhood. It might or it might not afford some sort of clue later on as associated with the outrages.

But as Nick looked about him while he stood there he saw that the bushes beside the telephone pole in the road were somewhat disarranged, and, stepping closer to it, and throwing his electric light against it, he discovered that creepers had been very lately used to climb up its smooth surface.

"So this is where the message came from," he said aloud. "I think I understand a little bit better now how the telephone part of it is done. The man who does it knows the tricks of a lineman. He carries an instrument on his person, and he climbs to the top of a pole, connects his instrument with the wire, and clings there with his creepers and a lineman's belt while he sends his message. Then he disconnects the instrument, drops to the ground, and escapes.

The detective turned and ran on again, this time going across the fields straight toward the house of Peter Bland, who was the man who had spoken third at the time of the meeting in the town hall. He was the man who had lost the money hidden in the stocking, and whose house had been rifled so early in this game of outrages.

As Nick drew nearer to it, he saw the flashing lights made by two lanterns as they were carried about inside the barn, and he knew that Mr. Bland was investigating the truth of the information he had obtained over the telephone.

Nick crept up as near as he could without discovery.

He wished to observe closely all that Bland and those with him might do, and to watch every move they made, and to remain unseen himself.

He regretted the necessity for this part of it, for his inclination was to enter the place at once and to examine thoroughly the ground and the stable where the mare had been slaughtered.

But he restrained himself on this point, believing that the time had not arrived for so decided an act on his part. He thought that the first one of the outrages committed by the miscreants after the detective's supposed departure from the neighborhood would be done hastily.

He preferred to wait until the second or the third, or even the fourth, one was undertaken before making his presence known.

So he watched outside every move that was made, creeping up as closely as possible, and witnessing the anger of the owner of the mare over the wanton outrage that had been committed.

At last the detective was decided on one point. He did not believe that Peter Bland was at all in the secret of the outrages.

CHAPTER V.

THE NIGHT ABDUCTION.

The gray mare was dead when they reached her; she had been poisoned with prussic acid poured upon her tongue from a small vial.

Nick was near enough to the building to hear the conversation of the men, to which he listened with some interest.

Peter Bland and his son and a hired man were present at the time Nick approached them and concealed himself near by; they were joined a moment later by two of the women of the household, and the group stood around the poor creature that had been killed, and which had served them faithfully for a long time.

"I knew that it would begin again as soon as that detective went away," said Mrs. Bland, with a choking sob, "and I just dreaded that it would be us, Peter."

"There, there," said her husband, "we can't help it. I don't know what it means, and I doubt if it will ever be explained. Sometimes, Ruth, I feel as if I'd like to sell out and move away from here. The whole neighborhood seems to be possessed of the devil."

"You ought not let the detective go away," suggested his son.

"What was the use of keeping him?" said Bland. "The men who do these things never work while there is any one here who stands any chance of catching them. Come, let's go to the house. We can't do any good by staying here." Then he turned to one of the hired men, and added: "Mike, you can dig a grave for the old gray out in the pasture in the morning, and bury her there."

The party entered the house after that, and presently it was dark again.

Experience had proved to the victims of these outrages that, once one was committed, there was nothing further to be done about it at the time. The marauders would not return, and the victims of their acts might as well retire again to their beds.

This was what the detective had been waiting and hoping for.

As soon as the coast was clear, he crept forward and passed inside the stable, closing the door after him.

He had taken particular note of where the several people had been standing around the horse, and he hoped that, possibly, notwithstanding that their presence might have obliterated any marks made by those who committed the outrage, he might yet find some trace of the perpetrators of the act.

But he was disappointed in this desire.

The persons who had killed the mare had evidently approached swiftly, done the deed, and flown.

He remained only a moment inside the stable, and then returned directly to the hut where he had left Chick.

Much to his surprise, when he arrived there, Chick was gone, and there was no message or anything else to indicate why he had gone away.

Nick gazed about him in surprise for a moment, and then, noticing that the switchboard was active, he sat down before it and placed the receiver at his ear.

Several of the conversations he overheard then were with people in the house of Peter Bland, from which information had already been sent out of the new outrage that had occurred. Nick heard it described in detail, and then he was startled into renewed amazement by the information which came to him instantly over the wires, announcing that two outrages had been committed, instead of one.

He understood instantly why Chick was not inside the hut when he returned. He knew that the assistant had overheard the announcement of the second outrage, and had gone as he himself had gone upon the receipt of the first one.

The second one, as he learned from listening at the

wires, was committed on the line of Party D, and at the house of a man named Moran.

It was Mrs. Moran who was talking over the wire to a brother of hers at the opposite side of the village, and she was describing to him what had occurred.

"We were called up just as usual," she told her brother. "I went to the telephone myself, and a voice said:

"Your house has been entered and robbed to-night, but as none of you were awakened, I thought I would tell you about it."

"Was that all?" asked her brother.

"Yes; that was all."

"And was your house robbed, Maria?"

"It has been literally stripped. That is to say, all the silver is gone from the dining room and many of the ornaments that were in the parlor. Everything that had any value to it is gone."

"Didn't you know the voice that spoke to you over the wire?"

"No; if I did I would tell you about it."

"Are you sure that you never heard it before?"

"If I had heard it before, I don't remember it."

"Was it the voice of a man?"

"I think so."

"Why do you only think so?"

"Well, it might have been a boy; or a woman with an unusual deep voice; or a man with an unusually light voice. I really don't know. I was so flustered that I dropped the telephone receiver without replacing it on the hook, and I called to my husband at once."

"It's too bad that detective is gone," said her brother.

"Yes, I think so, too. I think he ought to be asked to come back, no matter what it cost. It seems at least that we are safe from this sort of thing while a detective is here in the neighborhood, and we can better afford to pay such a man for staying here than to lose everything we possess as soon as one goes away."

That was practically all that was said between the brother and sister at the time, although there was much other conversation over many of the wires about the two occurrences of the night.

It was the first time when two had taken place during the same night; these two were in widely different localities.

Moreover, as Nick figured on the time that Chick must have been away from the hut, it seemed as if the time had not been very far apart between them.

"Is it possible," Nick asked himself, "that there is a regular gang of thieves and criminals engaged in this business?"

He could not answer the question satisfactorily at that moment, but convinced in his own mind that there was no likelihood of a third outrage that night, he put the receiver aside, and, paying no attention to the switchboard, lighted a cigar and gave himself up to reflection.

It was a half-hour later than that when Chick returned, and he came swiftly into the hut.

"Well?" asked the detective, as if he did not know anything that had happened since he left the hut himself. "Where have you been, Chick?"

"I have been to Moran's," was the reply. "There was a robbery there to-night. The information came over the wire about twenty minutes after you went out."

"I have heard some talk about it over the telephone," replied Nick, "so I knew what had called you away. Tell me what you discovered."

"I didn't discover anything. I think we're working too much in the dark by staying in this hut, Nick."

"I have thought so, too, since what occurred to-night," admitted the detective. "In fact, I was already doubtful of the completeness of our arrangement, and the day before yesterday I sent for Patsy. He ought to be here to-morrow morning, or perhaps to-night."

"I am glad of that," said Chick.

"When Patsy comes, and he will come in the same manner that we did so, that is, by stealth, I shall leave him here with you, and I will go back to live in the village again."

"Openly? As a detective?"

"Perhaps! I haven't determined as to that."

"Look at that switchboard, Nick."

"Well, what about it?"

"Doesn't it strike you that those wires are very busy all of a sudden?"

"Why, yes," replied Nick, smiling; "but there has been excitement enough to-night to keep them busy till morning."

"They seem to have got a lot busier in the last minute or two;" and he left his chair and crossed to the switchboard, fastening one of the receivers to his head.

For a moment he listened intently, and with some little appearance of excited interest; then he shut off the communication again and turned quick to face his chief.

"There has been another specimen of those scoun-

drels' work committed to-night," he exclaimed fiercely, "and this time it is at the house of the minister."

Nick had started to his feet at Chick's first words.

"What was it?" he asked. "What has been done?"

But Chick had already started for the door, knowing that Nick would follow, and now he called back over his shoulder the astounding words:

"This time they have committed an outrage indeed. The minister's daughter has been stolen!"

CHAPTER VI.

AN UNSPEAKABLE OUTRAGE.

The distance from the hut in the woods to the parsonage was approximately a mile.

The two detectives covered it at their best speed, running side by side, with their elbows held close like practised sprinters; and as they were both accustomed to violent exercise, they conversed together as they ran, finding breath sufficient to do so.

"Chick," said the detective while they ran forward, "when we arrive at the parsonage, I shall enter the house and make myself known."

"You will?" asked his assistant in some surprise.

"Yes, I'll leave you to carry on the outside work as we were conducting it until now. Patsy will arrive sometime to-night, or at least to-morrow, and you will instruct him fully in what he has to do. I shall leave the outside work to you."

"Are you going to let yourself be known in the community again as Nick Carter?"

"I don't know; perhaps; but the men who are committing these outrages have at last perpetrated one which must be followed definitely. If they have carried Sally Cross away with them or have injured her, there must be no further play about hunting them down. We must get at it thoroughly."

"I quite agree with you," said Chick.

"When we arrive at the house I shall go inside at once, no matter who is there. What I will do after that depends upon circumstances."

"I see."

"You will remain outside and do whatever you think best. Use your own discretion, only if possible, accomplish something."

Since the detective had been living at the hut in the woods he had gone about in old and much worn clothing, wearing a flannel shirt buttoned loosely about his throat and an old slouch hat. He had, also, the better to avoid remark if he should be seen at all, permitted the beard to grow on his face, so that now, the time being nearly two weeks since he had shaved, he presented quite a rough, and truth to tell, a somewhat forbidding appearance.

It was the only disguise he wore, but he could not have selected a better one and he looked no more like the spruce and perfectly dressed Nick Carter, smooth shaven and neat in appearance, who had appeared at the Westerly station one day, than any other farm hand that worked about the neighborhood.

Quite a throng of people had collected around the front of the parsonage from every direction.

The abduction of the daughter of one of the houses in the neighborhood was a greater outrage than had thus far been perpetrated, and for the daring marauders to have stolen away the minister's daughter was almost beyond comprehension.

Sally Cross belied her name in that she was about the happiest and pleasantest young woman in all that neighborhood, as well as one of the most attractive among them. Everybody loved Sally Cross, not because she was the daughter of the clergyman whom they respected so highly, but for her own sweet self and sake, and there was not a farmer in that region or a man or woman in that neighborhood, who did not feel a sense of personal outrage at the indignity now committed.

Nick left Chick at the outskirts of the gathering crowd, for the assembly was rapidly assuming the proportions of one.

He shouldered his way past them to the front steps and ascended quickly, passing into the hallway and glancing inside the study where he had first been received and wherein he had spent more than one pleasant hour with Reverend Reuben Cross.

The minister was there, and gathered about him were several of his neighbors. Others were approaching at each moment, and Nick, realizing that the study would be presently thronged, passed inside, and having with one quick glance made himself aware of who was already present, he closed the door by which he had entered and turned the key. Thus he barred others out.

His quick glance among those who surrounded the minister assured him that there was no one present whom he might not care to take into his confidence, and on the instant of entering the house he had decided what his course would be.

Reuben Cross and several of the others who were there with him turned in surprise at Nick Carter's abrupt entrance, and there was more than one excla-

mation of amazement when he closed and locked the door behind him.

But he stepped forward quickly, and facing them all, said calmly and in a low tone so that others outside the room might not hear:

"I am Nick Carter, Mr. Cross."

"Thank Heaven!" replied the minister, reverently.

"I assured you once, sir, that if I appeared to go away and leave you to the mercy of the miscreants who are mystifying this neighborhood, I would return."

"Yes, you did, Mr. Carter."

"Very well, I have returned. I have only just heard of what has happened here to-night."

He turned to the others and added:

"Good evening to you all. Before we proceed farther with what must be now said and done, I wish to ask each of those present here not to mention the fact that Nick Carter has returned, unless I give you permission to do so. Whether or not we can keep it a secret remains to be seen. I doubt if we can do so, but we can at least make the attempt."

"We will do as you suggest," replied John Turner, who was among them, and who had once lost an Alderney cow by having her throat cut.

"Mr. Cross," said Nick, "you are greatly excited, as I can plainly see. It has been a terrible experience for you, doubtless. But I want you to control yourself and tell me, calmly and concisely, everything that happened here to-night."

"I will try to do so, Mr. Carter," returned the minister brokenly.

"First, where is Mrs. Cross? I do not see her here."

"My wife is, fortunately for her sake, away from home at the present moment."

"She was not here when this happened?"

"No."

"Now, if you please, tell me what has happened."

"My daughter has been stolen away from her home."

"Yes," said Nick. "I know that much already. Tell me everything you know from the first moment of any sort of alarm until the minute I entered this room."

"I was awakened from sleep——"

"Had you retired or were you sleeping in your study chair, as I know is sometimes your habit?"

"I had retired."

"Go on then."

"I went to bed early to-night. I had been all day engaged upon a sermon which necessitated considerable study. I was tired. It was not yet nine o'clock when I went to bed."

"Well?"

"There is a bell which connects with the telephone over the bed in my room. I had it placed there because sometimes members of my parish are taken ill in the night and want me."

"I understand, Mr. Cross. Never mind that."

"It rang out suddenly and sharply. It is a strange thing, Mr. Carter. That if it rings for any of the other parties on this particular wire, I am not apt to hear it, but my own ring I am always conscious of."

"Well?"

"I started awake with the sense of something wrong strong upon me. I ran to the study—to this room and seized the telephone."

"Wait a moment," said Nick.

"Well, sir."

"Did you see any one or hear anything, or were you conscious of any circumstance, while coming from your room to this one, that was not entirely normal?"

"No, sir."

"Go on, please."

"I seized the telephone and listened. I heard a voice say:

"'Is that you, Mr. Cross?'

"'It is,' I replied.

"'Your daughter has been stolen from your house to-night,' came the astounding information to my ear. I staggered backward at first, not believing the terrible thing I had heard, but then there rushed over me the remembrance of all that has taken place so mysteriously in this neighborhood, and instead of hastening to the room of my daughter, as it was my impulse to do, I shouted over the telephone:

"'Who are you? Who is it that gives me such awful information?'

"There was no reply, Mr. Carter, and I knew that my informant had cut off the connection.

"I waited no longer. I dropped the telephone and ran to the room occupied by my daughter. It was in the utmost confusion, as you shall presently see for yourself."

"Wait," said Nick, "who is in that room now?"

"Nobody."

He turned to the others.

"May I ask one of you gentlemen to go to it at once, to stand at the door and to permit no one to enter there until I come?"

"I will go," said Turner, and Nick let him out of

the room, closing and locking the door, as he had done before.

"You say the room was in confusion, Mr. Cross?" the detective asked. "Tell me what sort of confusion you mean. Tell me exactly what your first impression was when you entered it."

"I scarcely know what impression I received, Mr. Carter. I was so shocked that I was not myself. I remember that the door was closed when I approached it, and when I sought to enter, I found that it was locked; but the key remained in the outside of the door, and I turned it and entered the room. It was dark in there, and I had no light with me. I groped for a match, for I knew that Sally always kept a box of them on the mantel. In approaching it, I stumbled over the bed clothing and finally over an upturned chair. But I found the matches, struck one and lighted a candle which was on the end of the mantel."

"Well?"

"The bed clothing had been dragged to the floor, and I had stumbled over the heap of it when seeking a match. A chair which usually stood near the head of the bed was overturned, as if some one had fallen against it or grasped at it when my daughter was dragged from the bed. The south window of the room was open, the lower sash being raised to its full extent. The curtain had been entirely torn away from the window. The cover which my daughter always keeps upon her bureau, which stands next to the window, had been dragged from its place and had brought with it every article that the top of the bureau held. These were scattered about the floor, many of them broken. My impression was that Sally had been forced through the window, and in passing it grasped the bureau cover."

"I thrust my head through the open window and called for help. I don't remember what I shouted or what I said. I was beside myself with agony and with fright, then I ran to my room, hastily putting on such clothing as I now wear. After doing that I ran downstairs and telephoned to Mr. Turner. That is all, Mr. Carter."

CHAPTER VII.

LIKE AN INDIAN ON THE TRAIL.

Nick Carter realized that if he was properly to work out this case against the midnight marauders which had now been brought to an anti-climax by the abduction of Sally Cross, it would no longer be possible for him to keep his own personality in the background.

He would have to come out in the open and let it be generally known and understood that Nick Carter was there on the ground, prepared to do all that could be done in the interest of the community.

The excitement had become so great consequent upon this last outrage, that there was nothing else to do.

The farmers and the men generally of that community were angered almost beyond self-control by this last act of the men whose victims they had been.

Reuben Cross had lived all his life among them. He had worked for them and with them, untiringly in their interest, and for their general benefit. He was a man for whom no sacrifice was too great if, by it, he could benefit his fellow-man, and he had ever been ready to extend a helping hand to the needy, and to offer assistance to whoever demanded it.

These men who looked up to him and revered him, would not consent to sit idly about while Reuben Cross' daughter was in the hands of those fiends, who had already done so much that was not only dishonest, but was also cruel and malicious.

Nick must declare himself.

He must appear in his own proper person, and conduct the work of trailing down those men openly so far as that might be possible.

But he could still keep Chick and Patsy in the background. He could let them work quietly and under cover, and could continue the operations already begun at the hut in the woods, where the telephone wires played such an important part in the affair.

But now the temper of the community was excited. Had one of the marauders fallen into the hands of those men that night, he would have been lynched without ceremony.

As soon as the minister finished his story and had dropped back upon a chair, covering his face with his hands, Nick turned to the others who were present, and said to them:

"I will ask you one and all to remain here with Mr. Cross for the present. I am going now to inspect his daughter's room. When I have done, I will return here to you."

He left the room and mounted the stairs, finding Turner on guard at the door where he had been sent.

"Has any one been to this door since you came to it?" Nick asked of him.

"No, sir."

"Do you think that any person had been into the room since this outrage has become known?"

"I don't think that anyone has been upstairs in the house, Mr. Carter," was the reply.

"Very well, then. Wait here for me."

The candle which Mr. Cross had lighted at the end of the mantel was still burning, for the minister had left it there when he fled from the room to secure his clothing.

It had burned down now almost to the socket of the candlestick, but it still afforded some light.

A porcelain shaded lamp on the centre table gave promise of better illumination, and Nick made use of it, flooding the room with its light and rendering the utmost corners of it plainly discernible.

The description of the room made by the father of the abducted girl had been clean, but not overdrawn; in fact, it was not complete.

The bed clothing was huddled in a heap on the floor near the foot of the bed where the minister had stumbled over it upon entering the room; the chair to which he had referred was tumbled over forward in front of the bed; the shade which screened the window, which now stood open, had been literally torn from its roller and was crumpled in a mass on the floor beside the window; the bureau cover with all that it had contained had also been dragged to the floor precisely as described by Reuben Cross; a picture which had hung to the left of the open window had been torn from its fastenings and the glass front of it was smashed into splinters.

The whole appearance of the room was precisely as if the girl, upon being rudely awakened from sleep, had striven and struggled her mightiest against her captors. It was as if she had seized upon everything within her reach while being forcibly dragged toward the window; as if the things that were overturned and torn and otherwise displaced had been done by her in her wild efforts to resist the attack that had been made upon her.

Nick, having lighted the lamp on the centre table, which fortunately had escaped demolition, stood, as was his habit on such occasions, for a long time silently in one spot, studying every feature of the scene.

What his conclusions were we will not explain as he arrived at them, but will refer to later as he made use of them; that being the better way, as we see it.

After a while he strode over to the window, but before peering out of it, as he intended presently to do, he gave his attention to the things upon the floor around him, and he discovered on the straw matting, that showed beneath the edge of the rug, some spots of blood, indicating, he thought, that some person, possibly Sally Cross herself, or quite as likely one of the persons who had attacked her, had been cut by the broken glass in the picture frame.

A large cherry tree stood beyond the window, approximately ten feet from it, and the lowest branches were almost level with the window sill.

As Nick looked out he saw that it would have been quite possible for the men, who had stolen the girl, to climb that tree and to place a short ladder so that it would reach from it to the sill of the window; and doubtless the girl, upon retiring, had opened the window herself for air and probably had also half raised the shade, now torn from its fastenings.

During his examination of the room, he discovered that none of the young woman's outer clothing was there. He believed that, more than likely, she had placed it upon one of the chairs on retiring and he could only conclude that the abductors, when taking her away, had been thoughtful enough to seize upon some of her clothing, also.

One dainty shoe remained, and it was on the floor halfway beneath the foot of the bed and the open window.

Nick supposed that whoever had gathered up the clothing to take it away had dropped that shoe where it now lay.

He picked it up and examined it, noting the fact that there was a thin brass plate fastened on the inner side of the high French heel, and he noted also that the inner or front part of the heel, instead of being shaped like a crescent, as is almost the invariable custom, was V-shaped, and he knew it, therefore, to be an imported shoe, a fact that was somewhat surprising, considering the place of residence and the rural life lived by Sally Cross.

He put the shoe in his pocket and went to the window again, but he turned away after a moment, extinguished both lights in the room, and went out, turning the key in the door after him, but leaving it there.

The lower part of the house was literally thronged by this time with neighbors and friends of the bereaved minister.

In some mysterious way one and all had learned of his identity by this time, and many were the eager questions addressed to him when he made his appearance.

"It is not the time now, my friends," he said. "Those of you who wish to help me most can best do so by returning quietly to your homes. In the morning I will call upon such as I need. I would suggest

that one among your number, or perhaps two, remain with Mr. Cross until morning; otherwise, he is better alone."

The detective passed to the threshold of the front door and had one foot on the piazza outside, when he turned again and said:

"It is very necessary that you all bear in mind the fact that I want no tramping about these grounds at the present time. The men who committed this outrage may possibly have left some traces of themselves in committing the act. I do not want you to obliterate them."

He descended the few steps to the dooryard, and several who stood watching him could see the flashes of his electric torch while he searched around the base of the trunk of the cherry tree, examined the bark itself; and finally they saw him start away, following the gravel footpath around the side of the house, but keeping upon the grass beside it.

They respected his wishes as he had expressed them, and did not offer to follow, but had they done so they would have noticed that he went forward, all the time crouched over like an Indian following a trail; they would have seen him presently cross the grass toward one of the outbuildings and stoop over to examine a ladder he found there.

After that he took up the trail again and crossed the wide lawn, in the midst of which a tennis court had been made.

His way took him directly across one-half of the court, and he stopped in the middle of it, dropping upon his knees and casting the light from his electric torch directly upon a footprint he had found there which, fortunately, had fallen upon a space of ground that was softer than that which surrounded it.

Presently he straightened up and called aloud the name of Turner, for he had already found that man to be helpful and consistent; and when Turner responded from the end of the stoop, Nick directed him to cross the lawn straight to where the detective was standing.

"Turner," he said, when the man reached him, "do you see that footprint in the soft earth?"

"Yes, sir."

"Are you willing to stand here and keep guard over it for a time?"

"Yes, sir; I am."

"I ask you to do so because I wish to take no chances of its being obliterated, and for the present I have other work to do."

"I'll watch that all right, sir; never fear."

Nick left him there and passed on.

He crossed what remained of the lawn, climbed a picket fence at the extremity of it, stopping long enough to possess himself of a long hair that had been clinging to one of the pickets. It was of the color and texture that might have fallen from the mane or tail of a sorrel horse, and the detective thought it might possibly be significant.

He went on again, still following the slender trail he had discovered, finding it only by means of almost imperceptible footprints upon the moist grass where dew had fallen during the night.

Presently he climbed another fence into the roadway, and beside the wheel tracks where the dust had not otherwise been disturbed, he found a repetition of that same footprint over which Turner was now standing guard.

Three or four steps farther on there was a confusion of footprints beside the wheel tracks in the road, indicating that the man whose trail he had been following had encountered others at that point.

The detective, satisfied with what he had accomplished thus far, was about to turn again toward the house, when he heard his name pronounced from the opposite side of the road, and he recognized the voice of Chick.

CHAPTER VIII.

READING THE SIGNS.

Chick's voice had proceeded from among a thick growth of lilacs beside the road opposite where Nick was standing, and he crossed at once, perceiving in the shadow two forms instead of one.

"Patsy has come," said Chick. "I thought I would tell you of it without delay."

"Good! I am glad of it," replied the detective. "Hello, Patsy. You have arrived in splendid time."

"I'm ready for work, too," said Patsy.

"I know that, lad."

"Any immediate orders, chief?"

"Yes. Wait here, both of you, until you see me leave the house. If I do not come directly to you, keep somewhere near me so that when I call I may be able to find you. I am going back to the house now."

He left them then and hastened back to the parsonage.

Most of the neighbors had obeyed his wish and taken their departure; several of them remained, however.

"I want one of you to go to the village and wake up the druggist," he told them. "It makes no difference which one does it, only I want it done quickly."

"I will go," replied one of the neighbors.

"Very well, Mr. Black. Tell the druggist that I want some plaster of Paris; enough to take the impression of a footprint I have found. Be as quick as possible, for I have no time to waste."

The man darted away on his errand, and Nick Carter went inside the house.

He found the minister in the study, calm and self-contained, but nevertheless pale and haggard by reason of the suffering he had endured.

He looked up as the detective approached him and smiled wanly.

"Have you any news for me, Mr. Carter?" he asked.

"No, sir; nothing."

"Do you think that Sally has been harmed?"

"I trust not, sir. We must try to believe for the best just now."

"Do you think they stole her away to harm her?"

"Let us hope not, Mr. Cross. It would seem to me that your daughter has been abducted more in defiance of the efforts that have been made against their previous acts than for any other reason. We must hope that this view of it is correct and that she will come to no harm."

"I am praying for such an outcome of it every moment, my friend," said the minister. "Heaven will listen to my prayer, I believe."

"Have faith then, Mr. Cross, and know that I will make every effort in my power to bring this matter to a speedy conclusion. I have help at hand. There are those near me who will assist mightily in my efforts, and I pledge you my word that I will not be long in trailing down the abductors of your daughter. And now, sir, if I may make a suggestion?"

"Yes, Mr. Carter. What is it?"

"Don't you think it would be well if you were to retire again? You can do no good by remaining here, and it is my belief that you need rest and quiet more than anything else."

"I can obtain that here in this chair in my study. I am more content here than elsewhere, and when presently I am alone, I will read my Bible and pray for the best. Will not that suffice?"

"As you please, sir. But I returned to tell you that I am going now to prosecute the search for your daughter. I may not return here again until I have good news to bring to you. I didn't wish you to be expecting me with every moment. It isn't likely that I will see you again for some hours."

"Very well. I know you will do your best."

It was only a few moments after that when the man who had been sent to the drug store returned with the plaster of Paris and also brought the druggist with him; and the latter had been thoughtful enough to bring along everything necessary to manufacture the soft mixture with which the impression was to be taken.

Turner was still standing guard over the footprint, and the several men gathered in a group around the detective while he made the impression.

Having done so the detective left the mixture where he had placed it, to harden, and directed Turner after half an hour to remove it carefully, to wrap it in soft cloth, and to convey it with as much care as if it were fragile glass to his own house, where Nick promised later to examine it.

He left them then, returned to the roadway, and approached the lilac bushes at once.

"I saw the flashing of your light, Chick, while I was over there at the tennis court," he said. "Tell me what you have been doing."

"I have been studying those footprints that attracted your attention a little while ago, and also the wheel tracks and the marks left by the horses that were hitched to the wagon."

"Horses?" asked Nick.

"Yes, there were two of them and one was a white one."

"How do you know that, Chick?"

"They were headed in that direction," said the first assistant, without at once answering the question and pointing northward. "I followed the wheel tracks backward a little distance and found where the team had been tied to the fence beside the road, about ten rods away. It was a white horse that was tied to the fence, for he rubbed himself against it; and the position of the wheel tracks show that the white horse was also the one on the nigh side of the team."

"Good!" said Nick. "Anything more?"

"The horses were backed away from the fence and brought up to this point near where we are now standing. There I think they must have met the man or men who came from the parsonage; after that the team was driven on toward the north."

"Anything more?"

"The horse on the off side wore a shoe, from which two of the nails are missing."

"Two?" said Nick.

"Yes."

"What does that indicate to you? Why should two of the nails be missing?"

"If the shoe were an old one," replied Chick, "it might easily be accounted for, but the impression made by it in the smooth dust beside the road shows that it is a new one recently set."

The detective nodded his head with emphasis.

"That means," he said, "that the horse which wore that shoe has a broken hoof, into which it was impossible to drive two of the nails which held the shoe, and therefore they were left out when it was set."

"That is my idea," said Chick; "it is the front shoe on the off side of the horse."

"And the horse is a sorrel," said Nick.

"Eh?"

"The horse is a sorrel; I found a hair from its mane clinging to one of the pickets of the fence over which the man who replaced the ladder where he found it had to climb. I placed no importance on it at the moment, but now I think that it must have clung to the man's coat and that he lost it in climbing the fence. If I am right, we know considerable about the horses. Patsy!"

"Yes, chief."

"Your stunt is cut out for you."

"Well, what is it?"

"Get busy around this neighborhood looking for a pair of horses such as you have just heard described. When you have discovered such, come to the hut in the woods, if you know where to find it."

"I do. I have been there already."

"All right. Skip now. And don't show up until you have found those horses. Remember, a gray or a white one and the other a sorrel with a broken hoof forward on the right side. By the way, Chick, was it the inside or the outside of the hoof that is broken?"

"The inside."

"That's all, Patsy. You may go now."

"What shall I do?" asked Chick when Patsy had disappeared in the darkness. For the young assistant did not intend to waste any time in searching for these horses. He would run every chance of interference and detection and would enter barn after barn in that neighborhood before another day should dawn in the effort to discover the horses he was seeking.

"I think you had better return to the hut, Chick," said the chief, after thinking a moment. "There is nothing you can do just now to assist me."

"I can aid you materially in following those wheel tracks if that is what you are thinking of doing; and there is absolutely nothing to be done at the hut."

"Not unless there should come still another call over the telephone," said Nick.

"Do you think it necessary that I should go there?"

"No; you may remain with me. It will perhaps hasten our work as you suggest. I will tell you how it may be done."

"Well?"

"Hasten away to the first corner toward the north, and while I am searching each side of the road between here and there, find out which way those horses turned, if they were turned at all; or if they were driven straight on."

From that point to the corner in question was a distance of about forty rods, and Nick found as he covered it that the vehicle drawn by the white and sorrel horses had stopped for a time directly in front of the parsonage; even the trampling feet of the neighbors who had called there had not entirely obliterated the hoofprints.

But those same trampling feet had effectually trodden out other signs which Nick was sorry he was too late to read.

He conjectured, however, that the wagon had only stopped long enough to receive those who had stolen Sally Cross from her bed chamber.

Apparently the horses had not been backed away from the fence where they were tied until a signal was given, or until one of the men who made the attack had taken time to go after them. Then they had been stopped at the point where Chick made his examination, long enough for the men to have replaced the ladder, then come back and get into the wagon; and then again it had stopped for the girl and the one who had her in charge; after which the vehicle had been driven away into the obscurity of the night.

CHAPTER IX.

A CLUE BESIDE THE ROADWAY.

It may seem to the reader like slender evidence upon which to base such a conclusion when Nick Carter determined the color of the horses that had drawn the vehicle in which Sally Cross was taken away a captive, but it must not be thought that this decision was irrevocable on his part; it was only that indications pointed to such conclusions.

Chick's deduction as to the color of one of the horses or its approximate color was quite certain, that

is, if no mistake had been made in reading the tracks themselves.

It must be remembered, however, that any vehicle might have passed that way during the night; might have stopped as this one had done at both places. Coincidences of this kind often occur to puzzle detectives.

But it was sufficient evidence to work upon, and Nick Carter accepted it as a basis for his immediate operations.

Doubtless you who read this have never undertaken to follow wheel tracks along a country roadway. If you have done so you will appreciate some of the difficulties.

You will know also that there is a great difference in the character of roads, and these differences may be found at short intervals as you pass along one of them.

In one place the highway will take you across a gravel bed where little or no impression is left by passing horses or vehicle; in another a bed of clay will interpose itself, and here, if the horses step outside the beaten tracks, or if the wagon swerves to the right or left by ever so little, a different idea of one or the other may be obtained; for instance, the size, shape and character of the horse's foot may be determined, and there is as great a difference in the sizes, shapes and the character of horses' feet as there is in the feet of human beings.

Furthermore where a wheel track is left to be read by unerring eyes, the character of the vehicle it bore along the roadway may also be conjectured. For example: if it is made by a solid rubber tire—a cushion tire as it is sometimes called—the fact will be plainly evident; if by a pneumatic tire that fact can be as plainly read as if it were written with ink on parchment and duly recorded.

If the tire is a steel one and is narrow and well defined the conclusion is inevitable that the vehicle is owned by one who cares for his possessions and who keeps them up to a required standard.

If the tire is worn and uneven, an imprint of this fact will be left in the clay or in undisturbed dust at the roadside and sometimes upon sand, and it will indicate unerringly the character of the wagon that passed.

There are a thousand and one little things which may be studied and from which conclusions may be drawn, if the man who is searching for them has had a sufficiently wide experience not to pass them by without seeing them.

While Nick Carter and his first assistant worked together that night along the highway, they covered a distance of more than three miles; they made several turns to the right and to the left; but finally to the surprise of both the detectives, the wheel tracks took them back again into the main street of the village, which was hard and smooth and even, and where no impression of any sort could be found on the surface of the roadway.

But the fact that those horses had returned to the village at all after participating in the abduction was significant.

Chick looked into the eyes of his chief, rather dismayed by this new aspect of the case; and he said:

"What do you make of that, Nick? Why should that wagon come back here without apparently having stopped anywhere along the road?"

"I'll tell you what," said Nick. "It informs us very plainly that we must go back again exactly over our own tracks."

"Why so?"

"Because it is evident that we have passed a spot somewhere on our journey where we should have stopped."

"I don't understand you."

"Chick, it isn't likely that those abductors brought Sally Cross into the village after they stole her away from her home."

"That is just what I was thinking."

"Then it follows that they must have gotten rid of her while on the way here, doesn't it?"

"It would seem so."

"To have gotten rid of her they must have met some one by appointment at some place along the different highways we have traversed."

"Very possibly."

"You see, Chick, in our eagerness to follow the tracks of the white and the sorrel horses, and of the wagon drawn by them we have been somewhat hasty. We have not noticed as sharply as we should have done the indications that might have been left by them along the course."

"That is true."

"We will go back again before it is daylight. I think there is time."

"Oh, yes, I expect we can make it."

"We know the route now, Chick. You will take one side of the road and I the other. We will not search for these tracks we have been following so much as we will seek some spot where two vehicles have met and stopped side by side."

"Well?"

"Don't you understand, Chick, that in order to do so, they must each have drawn a little bit out of the road, and each probably to the right hand of the direction in which they were traveling?"

"Yes."

"Come on, then, and let's lose no more time."

They started backward from the trail they had been following.

They hurried onward, bent a little forward over their task, flashing their electric torches, and keenly observant of every spot along their course.

In many places they noticed where the wheels had left the beaten track, but these had been seen during their first examination.

Still both Nick and Chick had been so absorbed by their desire to follow the tracks as rapidly as possible that they had not given much thought to the apparent careless driving of the person who held the reins; now, however, when they had gone nearly half the distance back to their starting place, Nick came to a stop at a point where the road crossed a patch of red clay, and he exclaimed:

"Chick, a woman or a boy was driving those horses."

"Eh?" said Chick, who was studying something else at that moment.

"A woman or a boy was driving those horses; or at least if it was a man who held the reins, he was not accustomed to doing so. The person who drove was not careless, but was ignorant."

"Look at this," said Chick, "or rather at these," and he held out something in one of his hands, apparently having heard nothing of what the detective had just said to him.

Nick shot his light into the palm of Chick's extended hand and discovered lying there two objects which at once attracted his attention and interest.

One of them was the butt of a half-smoked cigar, and it still bore the embossed band which cigar manufacturers invariably paste around their wares lately.

The cigar had burned to the band, so that one edge of it was scorched and wrinkled, but the end of the cigar which had been carried in the smoker's mouth was scarcely indented at all, save where one pointed tooth, evidently an eye-tooth, had been driven deeply into it. The under side of the cigar, directly opposite the mark, thus described showed only faintly the imprint of the teeth of the lower jaw of the smoker.

The other object to which Chick directed the attention of the detective was the end of a half-smoked cigarette, and it still bore upon it, plainly to be seen, a monogram in gold, the letters of which were C. G.

The cigarette was of the so-called Egyptian variety, although the particular brand was not marked on the paper.

"Where did you find that?" asked Nick.

"Right over there," replied Chick, pointing ten feet beyond where they were standing.

The detective tossed the two articles into the bushes beside the road, remarking as he did so:

"It isn't necessary to keep them, Chick. We will both remember the marks on them, C. G. on the cigarette, and the mark of the eye-tooth on the cigar."

"Something has occurred to me, Nick, that I would like to prove," said Chick.

"Well, what is it?"

"If that cigar and cigarette—if those two things were thrown away by people in the vehicle we are following, it is more than likely to have been done in order to light fresh ones, and if that is so; if they were thrown from the vehicle in question, it was because there was an opportunity to light fresh ones; that is, because it was stopped at about the point where they were thrown away."

"Well, go on."

"If we can find within a short distance evidence that the wagon did stop, I think it will establish that much of the theory."

"I think so, too."

"Now, another thing, Nick, that occurs to me in connection with this."

"Well?"

"Farther back on the trail we ought somewhere to find two more cigar stubs, one with the same mark of the eye-tooth and the other one considerably chewed——"

"Why so?"

"Wait, please; I haven't quite finished."

"Go on, then."

"Farther along toward the village from which we have just come, at about the distance the party should have traveled while smoking a cigarette or during the time that one would burn out, we should find somewhere two cigarette butts like the one you just threw away."

"Good, Chick! I see what you are getting at now."

"What I mean is this," said Chick. "The man who left the imprint of his eye-tooth in his cigar stub is not a habitual cigar smoker, but is a cigarette smoker, and his initials are C. G., unless the cigarettes he happened to have with him to-night were a present from one of his acquaintances."

"Or stolen," suggested Nick.

"True; I hadn't thought of that."

"Go on, Chick."

"The other man who threw away the cigarette stub I found which had been chewed a little bit is a habitual cigar smoker and is not in the habit of smoking cigarettes, but my theory is that the cigars gave out; that the man with the pointed eye-tooth gave his friend a cigarette; that he threw away his cigar when it was not half-smoked in order to light a cigarette himself, because he preferred it, and that at the same time he offered his friend a fresh one. That is what I read by these signs."

CHAPTER X.

THE TRAIL GETS WARMER.

A short distance farther on from where they stood while engaged in the foregoing conversation, they found indications such as Chick had described to show that two vehicles had met there and that both had stopped.

One of these had come from the village, or at least from that direction, and the other, as we already are led to believe, contained the stolen girl and her abductors.

It was more than likely that she had been passed from the charge of one party to the care of the other at that point, as the wheel tracks indicated that the two carriages had stopped very nearly together.

Although the roadway was soft enough to show the imprints of the hoofs of the horses connected with this new vehicle which had encountered the one they had been following, there was nothing characteristic about the tracks of either the horses or the vehicle of the second party to distinguish it from any other that might have passed along that way.

The detectives felt that they were up against a figurative stone wall in the progress of their case.

It was as if the captors had foreseen this careful trailing by detectives, and had prepared themselves for it; had directed that the second vehicle was to meet them at an appointed spot and relieve them from their burden and from their responsibilities.

Nick and his assistant spent more than an hour in trying to pick up and follow the second trail, but at the end of that time were obliged to confess themselves at fault, for they could find nothing to distinguish the tracks from the many others that had passed that way.

"We must return to the village," said Nick, "and do what we can to find what became of the white and sorrel team."

"You return to the village and let me go this way," replied Chick, pointing to the direction they had been pursuing.

"Why so?"

"I have an idea."

"What is it?"

"Well, it is rather a far-fetched one, Nick; in fact, it is only a guess based upon nothing more substantial than the mere thought it may be possible."

"Nevertheless what is it? I wish to know before I leave you."

"If you permit me to do what I want to do I shall continue along this road in the direction that wagon has been driven, but I shall look in the grass and weeds along the roadside rather than in the road itself."

"For what?"

"For cigarette butts."

"Why, Chick, what is your idea?"

"My idea is that the man who brought the girl away from the personage did not give her into the charge of the people in the other wagon."

"Then what in the world do you mean by——"

"I think that they changed places with the people who were in the other vehicle and that they took the girl with them."

"Oh, I see."

"If that is so, my cigarette smoker will continue to leave his tracks behind him in the form of cigarette butts. If I am correct, I will find other parts of butts like the one you lately threw away, and you will find none beyond that point where we discovered the first one."

"It will be rather a difficult sort of trail to follow, Chick."

"I know. It will be a long step between footmarks, so to speak, but the man with the eye-tooth was a cigarette smoker. He did not relish the good cigar he was smoking. He threw it away before it was half-consumed. More than likely he would smoke more or less constantly, and from time to time along the way he has traveled I may find the butt of one of his cigarettes."

"Suppose he turned off this highway onto another, you will have no means of knowing when or where he did so," said Nick.

"I will search each direction where there is a turn until I find a cigarette-butt like the one I seek if it takes me a week to do it."

"All right, Chick. Go ahead. I will return to the village and look there for the horses."

They parted there.

The distance was rather more than a mile, but Nick traversed it rapidly, and finally entered the town at the head of the street just as daylight was breaking.

His first act was to repair to the hotel, where he registered and took a room, after which he had himself shaved, and as soon as the stores were opened procured a change of clothing. Then he sought the druggist who had brought the plaster of Paris to him with which to make the impression of the footmark found in the tennis court.

"Tell me," he asked, "if you know of a team of horses in or near this village such as I shall now describe to you? One of them should be a white horse or perhaps a gray. It may be flea-bitten or an iron gray; probably the former. The other horse is a sorrel, or may be a chestnut with a mane and tail that is almost red. Such horses are not common and should easily be remembered if seen. The sorrel has a broken hoof on the inside of the right forefoot."

The druggist had expressed considerable interest when Nick began his description; by the time it was finished the man was smiling broadly.

"Everybody in town knows that team."

"Indeed?"

"It belongs at Hope's livery stable."

"Where is that?"

"Down the street, almost opposite the hotel."

Nick thanked him and went away, and while he was hurrying toward Hope's livery encountered Patsy, who announced with a broad grin that he had found

the horses and that the description of them was almost perfect, even to the broken hoof.

"I searched about a dozen different stables and barns before it occurred to me to visit either of the two liveries in this town."

"Are there two?" asked Nick.

"Yes; Hope's and Reilly's."

"And you found the horses at Hope's."

Patsy laughed.

"I didn't tell you that, but I suppose you found it out before I did, although you haven't been there. Yes, I found them at Hope's, and they were out all night, or nearly so. At least Hope says they were, and he is as mad as a hornet about it."

"Why so?"

"Because the horses and the wagon that went with them were taken from the livery during the night without his knowledge."

"What's that!" exclaimed Nick.

"It's a fact; or at least Hope says it is."

"Doesn't any one sleep in the livery stable?"

"Sure thing, chief; and he was sleeping yet when Hope got there this morning."

"Drugged?"

"No; drunk."

"Perhaps he had been with the horses."

"No; Hope doesn't think that."

"What does he think?"

"Why his opinion about it is the very natural one that his night man at the stable got loaded last night at the hotel bar and crawled into a vacant stall in the livery to sleep it off. That's where he was found this morning, only a little while ago. While he was asleep the men who abducted Sally Cross borrowed the horses and the wagon without asking permission to do so. That's the long and short of it."

The two were moving down the street together rapidly while they talked, and now Nick led the way into the livery stable where Uria Hope, the livery man, was still swearing about the abuse of his horses during the night.

Both of the horses were on the barn floor undergoing a thorough grooming at the hands of his men, while he strode up and down and around them, giving orders anon breaking into renewed bursts of vituperation against the marauders.

"It's a terrible thing, Mr. Carter," he exclaimed, recognizing the detective, for he had been one of those who were present at the parsonage the preceding night, and also like any other man of that neighborhood, he now knew Nick Carter perfectly well by sight. "It's a terrible thing; it's awful!"

"It certainly is," replied the detective, humoring him and wondering to what particular matter the man referred.

"It's bad enough to have these night-riders, as they call them in the South, infesting this community as they do; it's bad enough; in fact, it's simply awful that a young girl should be abducted from her home in the middle of the night, and taken, no one knows where. But it's a heap site worse to mix me up with it."

"How are you mixed up with it, Hope?"

"Well, ain't I mixed up with it? Didn't the galoot steal my horses in order to carry the girl away?"

"How do you know they did that?"

"I should think it was plain enough."

"I mean how do you know that it was the men who abducted Sally Cross, who also stole your horses?"

"Why two plus two makes four, doesn't it?"

"Usually."

"Well, I call it as plain as the nose on my face and you can see for yourself that that's prominent enough. My horses, and the best ones I've got in the whole outfit, have been driven almost to death during the night. I should say, by the looks of them, that they had traveled at least twenty miles. They're all stiffened up to beat the band, and the sorrel has gone lame again in the off forefoot. By jingo, Mr. Carter, if I knew the man who took them out of this barn, I'd shoot him. I would, by thunder!"

"Have you looked about the barn to see if there is any evidence as to who did take them?"

"No; I haven't. What evidence would they leave of such a thing as that?"

"They might leave considerable."

"Well, you can look for yourself, and go as far as you like. It's out of my line. I know that the horses were gone, and I haven't any doubt that those night-riders took them. That's all I do know."

"What wagon did they have?" asked Nick.

"One of my best surreys."

"Where is it?"

"That's it over there;" and the livery man pointed to one corner of the barn, where the carriages were kept. "That one with the canopy."

Nick approached it, and he spent a long time in examining it. He gave particular attention to the wheels, even going to the extent of making use of his magnifying glass, a thing which he rarely did, save on special occasions such as this one was.

He searched the inside of the surrey, and he found there at least one article which interested him and for which he had not been looking. It was a cigarette-stub bearing the monogram C. G.

He also made several further discoveries. One was that the surrey had somewhere been driven through a swamp where reeds were growing and among them that variety of flag which is popularly known as cat's-tail.

Fuzz from some of the cat's-tail had clung to the cushions of the seats; more of it still clung to one of the wheel rims; a bit of the flag itself had been caught in the axle between the hub and the shank, indicating that the detective was correct in his conclusions.

One other article he found convinced him that the surrey had indeed been used for the abduction of Sally Cross; not that he had doubted it before, but now he had proof positive of the fact.

It was a golden hair-pin, the color of Sally Cross'

hair, and he had seen several of its fellows among the litter of stuff on the floor in front of her bureau.

"The trail is getting warmer," he said to Patsy, who stood beside him.

"I hope so," said Patsy, "but it seems to me to be mighty cold yet."

CHAPTER XI.

CHICK MAKES A FIND.

Nick strode to the rear of the stable where the two horses used by the abductors were standing at the time they were taken from the barn. But although he searched in each of the stalls, hoping that some shred of clothing might have been torn from one of the marauders by a sliver or a nail, he found nothing. He returned to the ground floor, where the animals were still undergoing their grooming, and began an examination of the cleanings that had been scraped from them and that had been removed from their hoofs during the process of cleaning.

Here he found more evidences of their passage through a swamp. Here again he found traces of the cat's-tail flag and of other grasses which only grow in swampy places.

He called Hope aside and led him to the rear of the stable, where they would be beyond the hearing of others.

"Mr. Hope," he said, "you know this locality pretty well, don't you?"

"I should say so. I reckon I ought to. I've lived here ever since I was twenty years old. I came from Texas then, but I've been right here in this town almost forty years."

"I don't suppose there is a road anywhere around here that you haven't traveled over at one time or another."

"No, siree."

"This isn't a swampy country is it, Mr. Hope?"

"No; swamps are about as scarce around here as hen's teeth."

"Do you happen to know where there is one?"

"Why, yes. I know where there are several of them. But there ain't one nearer than ten or twelve miles. What do you want of a swamp?"

"I am anxious to see a real, genuine, warranted swamp where cat's-tail grow," said Nick.

"Cat's-tail, eh? You going to collect a few?"

"Possibly."

"Well, I might drive you down to Bingham's marsh. That's what we call it around here. We don't dignify it by the name swamp. We just call it a marsh, Bingham's marsh. I'll take you down there if you want to go any time."

"What sort of a place is it, Hope?"

"Just a marsh, that's all."

"How big a marsh is it?"

"Oh, I reckon it's about three miles around it."

"Is it very wet?"

"Some; in places."

"Is there any high land anywhere near the centre of it or anywhere at or near it which can be approached only by passing through a portion of the swamp itself?"

"Sure, there is."

"What sort of a place is that?"

"It's an old rattletybang half blown-down house that looked just about as old when I came here forty years ago as it does now. It is that house from which the marsh got its name. A man by the name of Bingham used to live in it about sixty years ago, and one night he went crazy and murdered his whole family and then hung himself by way of doing the thing up brown."

"I suppose nobody has lived in the house since that time?"

"Not since my knowledge of it, there ain't."

"Should you suppose that the house is habitable now?"

"Bless you, Mr. Carter, I don't know. I ain't never been nearer to it than to drive along the edge of the swamp on the water side of it. That's the only place where the road goes near to it."

"Isn't there a road through the swamp to the old house you just described?"

"There used to be sixty years ago, they tell me, but there ain't much indication left of it now."

"Do you think that you could drive across it if you should try, Mr. Hope?"

"I reckon so, in these dry times. I wouldn't like to try if the weather was wet."

"What direction is that swamp from here?"

"Just about northwest, I should say."

Northwest was the direction in which Chick had gone on his solitary search for cigarette stumps.

Taken all together the information Nick had gleaned from his visit to the livery stable was interesting and suggestive, and he resolved then and there to act upon the chance suggestion thus offered and to search the swamp and the old house in the midst of it without waiting to find further clues to lead him there.

It was imperative that Sally Cross should be rescued from the hands of the persons into whose power she had fallen as speedily as possible, for no one could foresee to what indignities she might be subjected if she were to remain long at their mercy.

"Give me your best pair of horses and your lightest vehicle that will carry four persons," said Nick. "Have them hooked up at once, and I would like to have you drive yourself."

"That I will, Mr. Carter; but I would like to know what you want to do at Bingham's swamp."

Nick took the man by the arm and led him through the stable to the front of it, then he pointed at the wheels of the surrey, at the axle and at the cushions, and he said:

"Do you see that fuzz that has been knocked away from cat's-tail flag? Do you see that bit of flag there in the axle?"

"You bet I do."

"A little bit ago you saw me examine the refuse taken from the horses' hoofs."

"I did."

"I found still more evidence there that they had been driven through a swampy place where cat's-tail flags are growing. Previous to that you had informed me that the horses had been driven twenty miles at least. It is my opinion, Mr. Hope, that those horses have been to Bingham's swamp sometime between the hours at which they were taken from the stable and returned to it."

"But look here, Mr. Carter, there wasn't time after the abduction of that girl for those horses to go to Bingham's swamp and be returned here before anyone who belonged at the stable got here to catch the fellows at it."

"That is probably true," replied the detective. "The horses did not go to the swamp after the girl was stolen, but before it."

"Then what in thunder——"

"We need not argue the matter, Mr. Hope. The question is, will you drive me to Bingham's swamp at once and as quickly as possible?"

"Sure, I will."

"Then get about it."

The livery man gave quick orders, embellished by expletives which need not be repeated here, but they served to accelerate the movements of his men, and it was not long before a light two-seated road wagon was hitched behind a pair of iron grays which looked capable of traveling thrice the distance required of them, and in speedy time.

Five minutes later with Patsy in the rear seat and Nick beside Hope, who drove for them, they started away toward Bingham's swamp, Nick having cautioned the liveryman to give no idea to the men about the stable respecting their destination.

He wondered if they would overtake Chick on the way. He wondered if Chick's search would take the first assistant in that direction.

Chick had been bound straight toward the northwest when he parted from Nick Carter, and as near as Nick could judge from the general direction given him by the liveryman, that road must have been the one they were now about to traverse.

The trail was indeed getting warmer.

Just here we may return for a moment to Chick himself.

When the detective left him, he hurried away rapidly along the road he had elected to follow.

He did not do as he had indicated to Nick Carter was his intention; that is, he did not search among the grasses at the sides of the road for cigarette stumps. Instead he pressed his elbows against his sides and started forward at a dog trot, gradually ascending the slight grade which took him eventually to the summit of a rise of ground nearly a mile away.

He encountered no turn as he sped onward, and it was his intention to make no particular search until he did so.

Chick was satisfied that the second carriage, the one which had met the white and sorrel team, had at least started along this road, and he knew that they could not turn out of it until a cross road was reached, unless indeed he should discover where bars had been lowered in a fence along the highway.

Chick had the instinct that he was on the trail. He often worked on impulses knowing that frequently he was benefited by doing so, and believing that if he were perchance correct in this one, it would save much valuable time to follow it at once. If he were mistaken it would be easy enough then to return and go over the ground again more deliberately.

But the road seemed to be different from others in many respects.

It was not intersected by other highways and cross-roads. It took him over a rough and uneven country where the vegetation became more sparse and less nutritious with every furlong he traveled.

At the rise of ground he stopped and took his bearings.

Daylight was just appearing, and through the gray dawn he could see that the road now descended gradually and almost imperceptibly toward timber lands to the northwest of him.

He rested only a moment and started on again, for still there was no turn in the road.

The way was now easier to travel because the little grade was not against him, and he still ran on and on, content to cover distances rather than to search for clues which he might not find, save by losing important and valuable time.

Another mile and then another was passed in this way, and then at last he arrived at a four-corners.

Here weeds grew luxuriantly everywhere, and in the road which crossed the one he had been traveling there was grass even in the roadbed itself.

He paused there long enough to discover that some kind of a vehicle had lately turned from the main road toward the west, and as if Fate had suddenly decided to lend him every possible assistance he found lying exactly in the track made by the tire of the wheel, another stub of a cigarette bearing the same monogram in letters of gold.

No boy was ever more delighted over his first pair of boots than Chick Carter was over that small stump of a cigarette.

He dropped it into his pocket and sped onward along the road which led him toward the west.

CHAPTER XII.

A MADMAN'S ACTS.

Chick adopted the same tactics as he sped onward that he had pursued thus far, with the one difference that he ran even faster.

He was now enthused with the idea that he was on the right trail and he was delighted to think that he was far in advance of his chief and Patsy.

It was quite natural that he should feel proud of the promised success and of the correctness of his own half formed theory.

On and on he ran, covering the ground with a rapidity that astounded even himself, nor pausing to take breath until nearly an hour later, when he came to a halt by finding himself in what might be called a *cul de sac;* that is to say, the road appeared to end abruptly at the point where he had arrived.

A fence, sometimes called a worm fence, but more popularly known as the Virginia rail fence ran along at right angles from the road in either direction directly in front of him.

There was also a fence of the same description on either side of him, and apparently there was no method by which any vehicle might have gone further than that, save only by taking down a portion of one of those fences.

A gateway or opening is easily made through a Virginia rail fence. One has only to lift the rails one by one and move them aside to drive through the opening thus created and then to replace the rails as they were found. It is a performance that requires only a few moments of time and is easily accomplished.

The ground was soft, and Chick was not long in discovering that the vehicle he was following had been driven straight onward past the fence in front of him.

He leaped it, and from that point on could easily follow the tracks which led away over soil that gradually became softer and which presently was moist beneath his feet.

He knew that he was approaching a swamp of some sort, but the trees, though scattered, were large and thick, preventing any extended view; and now also his progress was much slower, since there were times when, owing to the grass and weeds, it was somewhat difficult to follow the trail.

He kept on doggedly, however, winding in and out among the trees, and following no perceptible roadway, until almost another mile had been covered, when he ascended a slight rise of ground, and to his surprise discovered that he was on an old roadway that had once been made by the hand of man.

He could see where the wheels and the hoofs of the horses had left their marks upon the banks of this old road; and where they had turned to the left, following the grade deeper into the gloom of the forest which had now become a swamp on either side of it.

He had followed this grade for some distance, when he came to a sudden halt, startled by what he saw.

There was a wide opening in the trees in front of him. Through the opening he saw a broad extent of swamp-land rank with all sorts of vegetation which delights in such obscure places. Here and there a tree thrust its top above the bushes and around the borders of the swampy place the forest continued endlessly away.

The trees, mostly white ash, indicated perfectly the character of the soil in which they grew, for white ash never flourishes save in ground that is sodden with moisture.

The cat's-tail flags waved their tawny crests on every hand, and the place was unspeakably lonely.

But all this was not what had astonished Chick when he obtained his first view through that opening in the trees.

Directly ahead of him, almost in the middle of the swamp, a circular place that has been described and which might have been more than a hundred acres in extent, half hidden among the bushes was the ruin of a house and its outbuildings.

Nor was that all which had astonished Chick, for when the house first came into view he had seen a man standing in front of it.

When Chick halted he also dropped to the ground fearing that the other might see him. The man himself as quickly disappeared going inside the house or passing around it, Chick could not determine.

"By Jove, I've found them," he ejaculated in the sudden interest he felt at his discovery; and he added mentally: "I wish Nick and Patsy were both here now. I was a little bit selfish in hastening onward with my own ideas just for the sake of getting the best of them. I'm a little bit afraid to go forward alone; not afraid for myself but on account of the girl; for if those chaps who abducted her should get the best of me——" he stopped there in his mental self-accusation.

The roadway led onward toward the ruins he had seen.

It looked as if it had been long in disuse; as if the hands that built it had been for many years laid away in silence.

Nevertheless save in spots here and there where time had permitted it to sink in small sections into the swamp it was raised fairly above the softer soil and that it was possible for a vehicle was proved by the fact that the tracks made by the wheels of the wagon he was following could still be seen leading onward toward the old house.

Being fearful lest the man he had seen in front of the building should discover his presence there, Chick dropped upon his hands and knees and crawled forward, at times almost upon his belly. Now and then he laid himself flat upon the ground while he waited and watched for more signs of life around the old buildings.

But he saw nothing to alarm him and he continued to worm his way onward, but proceeding very slowly now and with the greatest caution.

There were times when trees or bushes intervened between him and the house, and on such occasions he rose to his feet and ran ahead as far as he dared to

go, dropping again flat upon the ground whenever the building came into view.

Thus, little by little, he approached nearer, and at last arrived under the bank of the higher ground upon which the house and the grove of trees stood.

He could proceed now more vigorously but not with less caution. He was more thoroughly screened from view, but at the same time he was much closer to the quarry he was seeking.

He paid no further attention to the wheel tracks but studied only the house and a means of approaching it unseen.

A thicket of spruce afforded him splendid shelter, and he thought upon how best to continue his search. He knew the importance of discovering how many persons were there in that old house, and of ascertaining for a certainty that it was the place to which Sally Cross had been taken.

That he had discovered the lair of the midnight marauders he did not for a moment doubt, for what better place could they have selected from which to plan and carry out their fiendish acts as described in the foregoing chapters of this story?

It was a perfect hiding place or resort for any class of men who schemed villainy of any kind.

"What a place for moonshiners or counterfeiters!" Chick muttered to himself at last, when he crawled to the edge of the screen of young spruces and gazed out across the clearing toward the old house itself.

He was not two hundred feet distant from it and he could see smoke issue from a broken chimney which extended only a few feet above the rotting roof. Much of that roof had already fallen in but it showed where it had been patched in places, thus rendering some of the rooms beneath it habitable.

He was well concealed behind that screen of spruces, but nevertheless he drew the branches still more closely about his face as he peered outward, and he waited, hoping that some sign of life within the house would manifest itself or that some indication might be given him how best to continue his efforts.

Minutes pass slowly at such a time as that, and it seemed to Chick as if hours ticked themselves away while he waited; in reality, less than one hour actually passed.

Then a man came around the corner of the house and was presently followed by another one; then a woman appeared.

"I'm going over there anyhow," said one of the men. "I can't get over the idea that I caught a glimpse of a man across the swamp when I came around the house almost two hours ago. You two talked me out of it, but I am uneasy. I'm going to find out whether I was right or wrong!"

"Have your way if you want to," said the woman. "We hid our trail so carefully that no one could have followed us. No one ever has."

"No one ever would have followed us either if you had not been so set on stealing that girl," said the first speaker. "I have had more than half a mind to shake this bunch ever since we got into this local business around here. I tell you that Jim is stark, staring crazy and that's all there is to it. What good comes of murdering some one's horse in its stall or butchering sheep that you don't want, or killing cows when you can't save the beef?"

"It's Jim's idea of getting even," said the woman, "and if he wants to do that, who's to hinder? It's his outfit. This is his place. He owns it. You work for him and he pays you. If you don't like it, get out. That's all there is to that."

The man started forward with an oath.

In order to reach the roadway which Chick had followed he had to pass quite close to where the young detective was concealed; and just as he reached that spot he uttered a loud cry of alarm and half turned as if to run back to the house.

At the same instant Chick saw Nick Carter and Patsy leap from the roadway into the clearing and start toward the house on a run.

Although surprised, Chick was equal to the moment and he sprang from his place of concealment and struck the man who was near him with his fist, knocking him senseless.

The woman and the man who had been standing near the house cried out in alarm and turned to escape, but a sharp command from Nick Carter who was approaching them on a run compelled them to halt and throw up their hands.

Just at that moment a third man dashed around the corner of the house and bounded toward them.

He was a giant in stature and he looked to be what one of his men had lately called him, crazy.

As this man ran forward he was met by the detective whom apparently he had not seen or at least did not regard as dangerous.

He would have escaped to the swamp had not Nick leaped upon him and borne him to the earth, and it is doubtful if the great strength of the detective would have prevailed at that moment had it not been for the instant assistance rendered him by his two companions.

The others offered no resistance. With the capture of the man Jim, they lost their courage and submitted themselves to arrest.

Sally Cross was found inside the house uninjured and not particularly threatened with danger. She explained that she had been abducted by her mother's brother, James Stedman, an escaped lunatic long supposed to be dead by those who had known him.

Stedman because of fancied wrongs he had endured in that community before he was committed to an asylum had sought vengeance against it by committing the fiendish acts already described.

But his career was brought to a sudden close by that last act of his in stealing his niece from her home in the dead of night.

THE END.

The next number (644) will contain "The Child of the Jungle; or, Nick Carter's Ingenious Ruse."

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THE OPIUM SMUGGLERS.

"Queer place," observed Hartland, of the Chinese customs service; "it is the first time I have set eyes on it, although I have been stuck in this benighted up-river station for the past fifteen months. It is in a very fair state of preservation, when you take into consideration the fact that it is over a thousand years old."

"It looks it," laughed Jimmy Santon, second mate of a Yang-tsi river steamer, who was on a few weeks' leave of absence. "The gray and crumbling walls, eh!—and the style of architecture—queer, you call it; to my mind it is grotesquely horrible. Look at those figures—the faces particularly. Must have been evolved from the distorted imagination of a mad sculptor after a bad attack of nightmare."

The two friends had reined up their Tartar ponies near the western end of the Tong-ting Lake, one of the largest in China, which is connected with the Yang-tsi River by an outlet at the city of Yoh-cheo Fu. On the shore of the lake, and not a hundred yards from the spot where they had come to a halt, there was an immense rectangular building, with walls of great thickness composed of blocks of roughly hewn stone. It had partially fallen into ruin, having been abandoned for many years by the monks or priests of the Tao faith, who had once made it their headquarters.

According to Hartland, it had at one time been a monastery used by the disciples of Taoism, a religion which is merely a gross idolatry, offering the worshiper a means of appeasing the evil spirits, of whom the majority of the Chinese live in constant dread. This accounted for the grotesque images which embellished parts of the outer walls, and no doubt the interior of the building also.

"There are a fair number of light-draft junks using this lake," said Hartland, pursuing a train of thought that had held him silent for a few minutes, "and they can get out into the Yang-tsi at any time of the tide. No vessel under a foreign flag ever comes into the Tong-ting, not even a steam-launch, for there is no trade, except for junks, and no passenger traffic. It would not do for a 'foreign barbarian' to show his nose inside the gates of Yoh-cheo."

"What are you driving at?" exclaimed Jimmy Santon. "You have some idea fizzling at the back of your brain. Out with it."

"I hope you give me credit for possessing more than one idea," replied Hartland, with a smile. "But you are right; there is an idea 'fizzling,' as you term it, in my brain, and I can give you the thread of it in two words—opium smugglers."

Jimmy Santon gave a long whistle.

"Is that so?" he murmured. "I have heard rumors that opium smuggling to a large extent has been going on in this part of the country for some time, but I did not put much faith in the rumor. You see, I knew there were some smart customs officials posted in the district, so I——"

"Stow your chaff," interrupted Hartland, noticing the mischievous twinkle in Santon's eyes. "I am serious. I believe that by chance we have hit upon the principal rendezvous of the smugglers, and if we can run them to earth it will mean promotion for me and a feather in your cap as well."

"Then I am with you in this adventure," exclaimed the sailor. He pointed to a junk about a mile off shore, sailing away from the land. "To my mind," he added, "that is a suspicious-looking craft. She is smarter in appearance and sails better than an ordinary trading-junk; and look at those marks on the sandy beach. A flat-bottomed boat has been run ashore there."

"There is a double line of footprints, too," pursued Hartland, "leading to and from the old monastery. Have you a weapon of any sort with you, Jimmy?"

"Not I," replied Jimmy Santon. "I trust to my fists if I get into a row."

"Not much use in the interior," said Hartland, "if you get up against a lot of hostile Chinamen. I always carry a revolver. Take my advice, if you can lay hands on a good heavy stick or anything that will serve as a weapon, secure it. We will have a look at the interior of that building, for I have a fancy we may find something interesting inside."

"Highly probable," agreed Santon. "Living Chinamen or graven images, which will it be?"

"Both, perhaps," responded Hartland. "With some boxes of smuggled opium thrown in, unless I am greatly mistaken."

They dismounted and tethered their ponies in a deep angle of the building, after which they noiselessly made their way through a jagged gap in the masonry where a window had once been. For obvious reasons they preferred that way of entrance to the big main door.

Traversing a couple of narrow passages, they at length found themselves in a large chamber, the lofty roof of which was supported by stone pillars. The end at which they had entered was wrapped in a twilight obscurity, but the farther end was more or less illuminated by a smoky torch.

Grim and grotesque faces looked down on them from the walls, but they paid little heed to them. Graven images of horrible aspect might have been effective in scaring off evil spirits, but the two healthy, strong-nerved young fellows "would scorn to turn a hair"—as Santon put it.

The five living figures, Chinamen all, who were moving about as silently as shadows, looking curiously missshapen in the wavering flare of the torch, did, however, attract their very serious attention. Two of them were lifting a square case on to a pile of others.

"Chests of opium!" murmured Hartland. "There is no mistaking them. We have caught them red-handed, Jimmy."

Santon picked up a broken stick of some hard and very heavy wood, grotesquely carved. It was about three feet in length.

"This will do nicely," he said. "If they show fight we shall have a lively time. That big fellow with the unpleasant face may prove to be an ugly customer."

"I know him," whispered Hartland. "It is Yen-Li. I have met him often in Hankow, where he passes for an honest merchant. But he has an evil reputation, and I am not altogether surprised to find that he is in with the opium smugglers."

They continued to move slowly forward while they were

whispering together, and it is probable that their leather-soled boots made some slight noise on the stone-paved floor, for Yen-Li suddenly turned toward them, and catching sight of their shadowy figures uttered a sharp exclamation, which brought his associates to his side.

Four of them were armed with formidable-looking knives, but Yen-Li had snatched up a heavy military sword, which he carried presumably in virtue of his position as leader.

"We are discovered," said Hartland, "so we must put a bold front on it. Leave the talking to me."

"Willingly," replied Santon. "I wish I had that fellow's sword, though. It would be more serviceable than this stick."

"Hello! Yen-Li!" exclaimed Hartland. "Who would have thought of meeting you here? I had no idea that you took an interest in old ruins."

Yen-Li started when he recognized the speaker, and his face turned from yellow—its natural color—to a sort of dirty gray. He knew that to be discovered engaged in opium smuggling by an officer of the imperial customs service would entail very serious consequences for him.

"Ah, Mr. Hartland," he said, speaking in very fair English. "What for are you in this place? This too muchee pleasure for me."

"Too much of a surprise, you mean, eh?" returned Hartland. "But I don't think we need beat about the bush——"

"What thing! Beat about bush! No savee that kind of talk."

The eyes of the big Chinaman glittered, and it seemed that he was ready to show fight. No doubt it had occurred to him that these two young fellows could easily be disposed of, and the crime never brought home to him or his associates. From his point of view their death would be far preferable to his own ruin and probable imprisonment.

"Perhaps you will savvy this," pursued Hartland quietly. "That opium smugglers are liable to very heavy fines and long terms of imprisonment. You appear to be the head of a gang that we have long been trying to—— Ah, would you? Look out, Jimmy!"

"All serene," replied Jimmy Santon cheerfully.

At a signal from Yen-Li the Chinamen had made an ugly rush at the two foreigners, and as they were tough customers, who had spent their lives in desperate enterprises, they were by no means antagonists to be despised.

Hartland fired, and the bullet, passing underneath Yen-Li's upraised arm, found its billet in the shoulder of the man behind him. The fellow dropped with a howl of pain.

"One less," muttered Hartland. "They are only two to one now, Jimmy."

He had no intention of killing any of the smugglers, but he meant to disable as many as possible.

Yen-Li had no practical knowledge of swordsmanship, but he made terrific sweeping cuts with the weapon, any one of which would have killed a man had it taken effect.

Luckily they did not take effect, although Jimmy Santon had a narrow escape, the top of his pith helmet being sliced clean off.

"That was a close shave," exclaimed Hartland.

"Near to a hair-cut," replied the irrepressible Jimmy, as he brought his stick down sharply on Yen-Li's knuckles, causing him to drop his sword. Then he closed with his big antagonist, and from that moment the Celestial's fate was sealed, for Jimmy Santon was an expert wrestler, and in less than three minutes he had thrown his adversary, who, being a heavy man, was half-stunned by the fall.

In the meantime, Hartland had brought his revolver into play again and wounded a second man. The other two flung down their knives and bolted, having no taste for fighting the "foreign devils" when the odds were no longer in their favor.

"There is a length of new manila rope coiled on top of those opium-chests, Hartland," said Jimmy Santon, when the fight was over, and they were attending to their prisoners. "Pass it along, will you, and I will secure Yen-Li's wrists and ankles. I think he is 'playing possum,' and watching for a chance to break away."

Santon was right, for no sooner had the words passed his lips than Yen-Li made an attempt to leap to his feet. The muzzle of Hartland's revolver pressed against the side of his head convinced him, however, that further resistance would be useless. The rope was then brought into use, and under Santon's skilful manipulation the Chinaman was bound hand and foot in such a manner that there was no possible chance for him to wriggle himself free.

"Wonderful persuasive power in the business end of a revolver," observed Jimmy Santon. "We should hardly have come through this affair 'right end up' without the aid of your weapon. Now, what is the next move in the game?"

"Bind up the wounds of these two fellows, and leave them here for the time being," replied Hartland. "Then hoist Yen-Li on to one of our Tartar ponies, make our way to a quiet village where we are not likely to be mobbed, and demand assistance of the local mandarin until I can communicate with headquarters."

This plan was carried out, Jimmy Santon and Hartland taking it in turns to ride the spare pony, for they had a matter of fifteen miles to traverse before they obtained the assistance they required.

The smart action on the part of the two young officers put an end to opium smuggling on the Yang-tsi-Kiang. Hartland received his longed-for promotion in the customs service, and Jimmy Santon was so warmly commended by the authorities that the shipowners under whose flag he was serving shortly afterward gave him the appointment of chief officer on one of their largest steamers.

QUEER TELEGRAPH-POLES.

The most original telegraph-line in the world once extended from the capital of Bolivia, La Pas, to the town of Oruro. In this part of Bolivia there are no growing trees, and wood is so difficult to find that even the ordinary household furniture of the natives is invariably made, not of wood, but of dried mud, or adobe.

So when the war broke out between Chile and Bolivia and a telegraph-line became urgent, it was adobe that was chosen for the queerest telegraph-poles in existence. These pillars were built on stone foundations, and measured about five feet square at the base, with a height of about fifteen feet.

They were placed at intervals of about 361 feet, and thus held the wire at a height sufficient to clear the only animals of the country, the llama and the donkey. The total length of the line was 156 miles.

Among other curious telegraph-lines is the growing-pole line erected in Uganda by an English engineer, who could not find any dead wood which would withstand the white ants and hit upon the idea of transporting growing bark-cloth trees to the side of the roads and using them as poles. This system has been used for ten years or more.

In the Dutch East Indies growing trees are turned to account also, but there a wire is stretched across the road between the trees on either side, and the insulator is suspended in its middle, and the line is thus over the road and clear from vegetation.

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